

# Sovereign Virtue: Singular Fame

Margaret Cavendish's self-construction as woman and author, and  
the roles she sees for women as thinkers and beautiful tyrants in  
*Natures Pictures drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life.*

---

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts in English  
in the  
University of Canterbury  
by  
Jennifer L. Geard

---

University of Canterbury

1992

**To Judith Miriam Lovatt Geard**

Who was determined that we kids would get an education,  
and taught me the traps in the Cavendish compromise.

## Contents

---

Abstract	v
Explanatory Notes	vi
<b>The first Book</b>	
Introduction	1
Critical Perceptions	10
Context and Text: The Woman and the Writing	16
<i>Natures Pictures: The Text</i>	26
<b>The second Book</b>	
Mortal Bodies: Immortal Fame	31
Femininity and the Bonds of Virtue	43
An Excursion into the Text: Reading and Commentary	53
The Spider and the Phoenix: Originality	57
Selves and Others: Cavendish's Women	68
Absolutism and Authorship: Politics, Religion, and the Woman Writer	85
Beautiful Tyrants: Transcending and Focusing the Feminine	106
Dying for Fame: Death and Wasting as Creative Self-Denial	117
Conclusion: Cavendish's Project	124

Afterword	127
Acknowledgements	128
Appendix A: Cavendish's Bibliography	130
Appendix B: Contents of <i>Natures Pictures</i>	132
Works Cited and Consulted	143

## Abstract

---

Wanting to be more than a body subject to time, and fearing erasure, Margaret Cavendish wrote in order to leave artifacts which characterised her and would ensure the continuation of her identity in immortal fame. Since publication was a transgressive act for a woman, she made her writings into defenses of virtue and utilised a range of other feminising strategies to ensure that she would be remembered as a good and distinctive woman.

Among these strategies were her use of femininity as performance art; her claims to extreme originality, taking her ideas from her own fancies and conceptions rather than any external stimulus; her use of the metaphors of absolutism as a basis for constructing herself as a writing subject; and her advocacy of beauty's tyranny over men. Given the paradoxes of the project it is little surprise that many of her female protagonists assert the strength of their wills to deny themselves sustenance and life.

## Explanatory Notes

---

Though I cannot be *Henry* the Fifth, or *Charles* the Second,  
yet I will endeavour to be *Margaret* the First.

Cavendish, quoted in Grant: 15.

The author of *Natures Pictures* was born Margaret Lucas, often signed herself Margreat or Margareta, and upon marriage to William Cavendish became Marchioness, and eventually Duchess, of Newcastle. Given the fervour of her desire for fame it is ironic that she is so difficult to name in a brief and appropriate manner. Bibliographies list her as "NEWCASTLE, Margaret (Lucas) Cavendish, Duchess of," but she is as often indexed as "Cavendish" rather than "Newcastle" and the occasional critical work refers to her as "Margaret" or "the Duchess."

The title page of *Natures Pictures* declares that it was written by "the thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle", and in it she signed her letters to the reader "M. Newcastle." It was conventional to nominate nobles by the locale attached to their main title, but that prerogative belongs more properly to her husband William than to Margaret Cavendish. Precedent would have her designated "the Marchioness of Newcastle" when she wrote *Natures Pictures* and "the Duchess of Newcastle" after the Restoration, however these are clumsy and distancing modes of address: although they keep the issue of class always before the reader, it is her endeavour as a woman that is of more interest to me.

Of the various names and titles she bore, Margaret is the only one she retained for life. Since she expressed her desire to be “Margaret the First” that might have been an appropriate choice. However, while the use of the personal name in the public realm may reflect the respect accorded to monarchs, more frequently it suggests the condescending diminishment of women and children. While it encapsulates the paradox, it is too open to a reading I wish to avoid.

So I have called her Cavendish, not because it has any better claim to denote her, but simply because I became accustomed to it as the designation used most often in my early reading. In describing her life before her marriage I have tended to refer to her as Margaret Lucas. Cavendish’s husband is differentiated by his forename and referred to as “William Cavendish.”

In keeping with accepted feminist usage, the terms “female” and “sex” are used to refer to biological sex, and “feminine” and “gender” to describe the socially conditioned aspects. Although it is now understood that the sex/gender complex is not so easily resolved into compartments, the distinction is useful when discussing the work of Cavendish—who believed in the separable effects of nature and education—and the ambient attitudes of Stuart society.

I have used the first edition of *Natures Pictures drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life*, printed for J. Martin and J. Allestrye at the Bell in Saint Paul’s Church-yard, 1656. This edition contains the

autobiographical “true Relation” which was suppressed in the later edition of 1671 (a fate which again befell the “true Relation” when it was appended to the first edition of Cavendish’s biography of her husband and removed from subsequent printings).

The punctuation, spelling, and pagination of the original text are preserved as far as possible in all quotations from *Natures Pictures*. Note especially that while apostrophes are used for contractions they are not used for possessives; that it was standard practice to utilise semi-colons where we today would place a full point; and that Cavendish’s spellings are sometimes non-standard even for her time. There are occasional misnumberings in the pagination: references to those pages are indicated with the page number as printed, followed by the “correct” page number marked with an asterisk. The preliminary section, unnumbered in the original, has been designated “A##” starting at the title page.

No hard copy of *Natures Pictures* is publicly available in New Zealand, and my version of it is taken from the University Microfilms International collection of microform records held in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington. The first edition is identified by the Wing number N855, and the second edition as N856.



## The first Book.

---

### Introduction

---

Margaret Lucas Cavendish, Marchioness and then Duchess of Newcastle, was a royalist woman who published more than a dozen books of science, philosophy, poetry and fiction in the middle of the seventeenth century when it was unusual for a woman to write at all.<sup>1</sup> Whereas sixteenth-century Renaissance humanism had fostered scholarship in women such as Margaret More Roper and Elizabeth Tudor, by the seventeenth century such intellectual pursuits were again discouraged.<sup>2</sup> Cavendish desired fame, and her writing is therefore the site of much conflict; the impulses of her gender, class, and ambition providing fertile tension which produced the space, subject, and subversive sub-texts of Cavendish's writings. Cavendish was particularly concerned with the options she could explore for female characters who show

---

1 Cavendish's bibliography includes fourteen titles which in their various revisions and editions account for 27 Wing numbers. A list of these works is contained in Appendix A.

2 Betty Travitsky summarises the changes in women's writing in the Elizabethan period:

With the new humanism, and reform theories, and with Elizabeth I to support them, Renaissance women—first noblewomen and eventually middle-class women as well—wrote over one hundred works of varying types and lengths. Most of these works were religious: many were prayers, meditations, and confessions. With three exceptions, the women who wrote them conformed to Renaissance conventions concerning women, except insofar as they dared to write at all (Travitsky: 256).

many signs of being fantasy projections of herself. It is these options which I shall examine in some detail.

The tensions of her self-contradictory project show in the structure and content of *Natures Pictures drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life*, which is equivocal and polyvocal; elusive even when at its most didactic. Cavendish contradicts herself in a point and counterpoint of narrative interplay which utilises the technical ploys of multiple narration, dramatic debate, story-cycle and mixed mode: techniques which permit her to use many voices without committing herself. The writing itself is a dance of advance and retreat in which she states and retracts, demands and demurs, presents versions of herself and undercuts them. The paradoxes in Cavendish's project prevent her from arriving anywhere: she is constantly in process and in progress, presenting different ideas and possibilities without resting with any for long.

Cavendish is not nowadays well known, and it is tempting for those who encounter her fleetingly in the pages of Pepys's *Diary* to dismiss her as an eccentric with a taste for unusual clothes and dramatic public display. This is an aspect of the woman's character, but to be understood as more than an interesting oddity her eccentricity must be seen in a wider context of her projects and achievements. Virginia Woolf's description of the works of the Duchess of Newcastle gives a sense of her wide-ranging concerns:

There they stand, in the British Museum, volume after volume, swarming with a diffused, uneasy, contorted vitality. Order, continuity, the logical development of her argument are all unknown to her. No fears impede her. She has the irresponsibility of a child and the arrogance of a Duchess. The wildest fancies come to her, and she canters

away on their backs. We seem to hear her, as the thoughts boil and bubble, calling to John, who sat with a pen in his hand next door, to come quick, "John, John, I conceive!" And down it goes—whatever it may be; sense or nonsense; some thought on women's education—"Women live like Bats or Owls, labour like Beasts, and die like Worms, ... the best bred women are those whose minds are civilest"; some speculation that had struck her, perhaps, walking that afternoon alone—why "hogs have the measles", why "dogs that rejoice swing their tails", or what the stars are made of, or what this chrysalis is that her maid has brought her, and she keeps warm in a corner of her room. On and on, from subject to subject she flies, never stopping to correct, "for there is more pleasure in making than in mending", talking aloud to herself of all those matters that filled her brain to her perpetual diversion—of wars, and boarding-schools, and cutting down trees, of grammar and morals, of monsters and the British, whether opium in small quantities is good for lunatics, why it is that musicians are mad. Looking upwards, she speculates still more ambitiously on the nature of the moon, and if the stars are blazing jellies; looking downwards she wonders if the fishes know that the sea is salt; opines that our heads are full of fairies, "dear to God as we are"; muses whether there are not other worlds than ours, and reflects that the next ship may bring us word of a new one. In short, "we are in utter darkness". Meanwhile, what a rapture is thought! (Woolf 1925: 103-4)

Woolf's description is of a vigorous intellectual dilettante—certainly a view with some merit—but her emphasis on the expansive and whimsical nature of Cavendish's concerns omits discussion of the determination and driving ambition which brought the isolated royalist into print and kept her there through a stream of volumes and a mixed and sometimes vehemently critical reception. Cavendish was all the things Woolf describes, but she was also a woman and a writer at a time when these were widely

thought to be mutually exclusive. She was ambitious for lasting personal fame, yet was conditioned to believe that this ambition was inappropriate to a woman.

Cavendish wrote in masculine literary and intellectual traditions because they were the only ones available to her. Whatever her own education—and although she made up for her early inadequacies later in life she was not what was considered well-educated—the ideas which permeate her works are the ideas around her at the time: the “either this or that” format of her descriptive and didactic passages comes originally from Aristotle and was also characteristic of another writer whose ideas influenced her: Machiavelli. Her distrust of rhetoric is as old as Plato, and presented in much the same terms as his. Her valorisation of patient fortitude and heroic suicide marches with the revival of Stoic ideas which was prevalent in her time. When William hawks the book’s wares in the opening letters, he compares Cavendish favorably to all the classical writers.

But a tradition wrought by men proved problematic for a woman. It was not just that the endeavour of writing, and the self-assertion that went with that writing, were considered appropriate to men rather than to women, but that the ideas that went into the writing of the time—the philosophy and metaphor which pervaded the works and thought of the day—used gender as metaphor in ways which firmly created the male as subject and the female as object Other. This dichotomy leaves its traces throughout Cavendish’s writing:

Margaret Cavendish alone of all the women writers of her day espoused writing as a career with the avowed intent of

winning fame in accordance with the ideals of Renaissance humanism. Paradoxically, however, her very intent was a heterodox application of these ideals, which were designed to spur gentlemen rather than ladies to heroic achievements. The only type of "fame" with which a woman was supposed to be concerned was her reputation for virtue or chastity.

Of course, Margaret Cavendish, was fully aware that in making her bid for fame by her venture into print she was arrogating to herself a goal for which, traditionally, only men had presumed to strive. It is therefore not surprising that her feverish search for fame plunged her into a deep and pervasive conflict with herself and with the society of her time (Gagen: 520-1).

Gagen summarises the basic conflict within Cavendish's work: that she was a woman who endeavoured to escape the oblivion which claimed the generality of women by engaging in an endeavour which was considered the prerogative of men. Royalism was central to her background, yet as a woman she was excluded from the prime, personally-defining relation of subject to sovereign. Fearing chaos and personal erasure, she sought to take control of her life and her posterity by constructing and publishing records of worlds in which she was a godlike monarch. Observing the disorder in the world around her, she valorised the abstract and non-physical over the material and changing world. Torn between desire to make herself known and fear that her self-advancement would be seen as a sign of bad moral character, Cavendish utilised a variety of strategies to present herself as a stunning and virtuous woman who was a creator of texts and ideas.

Yet, as this thesis will show, Cavendish's claim to absolutism was subverted by the subjection of wives to husbands, and the primacy of the non-physical was challenged by the supreme importance of

beauty to a woman's life. She advanced two assertive courses for women: to eschew marriage and devote themselves to study and contemplation, or to rule their rulers through beauty and charm. Although other women might choose one way or the other, her works suggest that Cavendish herself followed both these paths.

The first course, of contemplation and writing (and publishing), formed a path of mental endeavour by which women might find lasting usefulness and satisfaction in troubled times. Cavendish chose writing as her method predominantly because of its accessibility and the varied modes it offered in the service of her dual project of creation and fame. Lacking the education and world-view of a scholar, Cavendish was the subject of some ridicule in intellectual circles, yet she made a virtue of this limitation by claiming that her unique and fantastical ways of thought were both a more directly natural way of approaching the world and a mark of her untainted originality and personal distinctness.

In the second course women were saved from a miserable subjection through their domestic influence over men as mothers, sisters, and hostesses, and especially by the control they might gain through the desire their beauty could arouse in men. Beautiful women might be men's tyrants and goddesses—a destiny she claims is far preferable to being their equals. In this Cavendish reaches a conflict of concepts which she cannot resolve: she reduces the importance of the physical world in favour of the mental or spiritual, but she lives in a real world where beauty is of paramount importance to a woman's career. This beauty, however, is subject to the ravages of time, and is not a secure basis on which to build a sustainable career. She shows great ambivalence about the body: its

beauty is transcendently angelic but also treacherously prey to wanton sexual desire and aging. The body is a dominant definer of woman's existence, representing all that Cavendish considers especially good and especially bad about being female.

The impossible conflicts which consequently face many of Cavendish's female protagonists are often, in a twisted way, freeing. For Cavendish constructed herself in fantasies in which she played the starring role, where the beauty of her form and mind defined her and gave her a pass-key to a world of melodramatic adventure in which apparent obstacles were actually opportunities to show the strength of her virtue and will: in which she was a victim to prove her victory. The assertive defence of virtue which was an acceptable response to unwanted attentions gave good women justification for engaging in activities which were usually closed to them. The more extreme situations channel the heroines into forms of creative self-denial in which they can show the force of their personalities only in acts of self-deprivation or self-slaughter. The repetitions of this pattern in the text arouse speculation about Cavendish herself: her works suggest that she would advocate enthralling the powerful with beauty and holding them with virtue, wit and unique companionship, yet she probably hastened her own death by her fasting, purging, and bleeding. The text of her own life appears to have been partly successful in pursuit of agency and partly subject to the traps of assertive self-denial which Cavendish so readily rehearses in her books.

My reasons for examining *Natures Pictures* have to do with the range of material which this text offers for analysis and the possibilities of finding patterns in the diversity of stories. The

presence of the autobiographical “true Relation” was another attractive feature of the work, since conscious self-writing marks an important stage in the history of female subjectivity. Also, reactions to Cavendish's writing have been so diverse that I wanted to find out for myself more about this women of whom Firth wrote:

Her reputation has suffered something from the pens of others, but more from her own. She wrote a number of excellent things, but carefully buried them in a vast heap of rubbish. No woman ever more frankly described herself in her autobiography, or more carelessly displayed herself in her writings. Even those who admire and love her most must admit that some of her defects are too highly developed for the character of a perfect heroine. Her love of singularity amounted to a passion; in her philosophy as in her clothes she was determined above all things to be original. Her vanity was enormous and insatiable. ‘Vanity,’ she says somewhere, ‘is so natural to our sex that it were unnatural not to be so’; but her vanity was something superfeminine (Firth p. xxx).

The gendered terms in which Cavendish's work is discussed made me wonder how much of her transgression was inherent in a woman's venture into print in the 1650s, and how much was purely personal. As I learned more of Cavendish and her time I found the two to be inseparable.

While recent criticism has begun fresh explorations of aspects of Cavendish's writing, my thesis, paying special attention to *Natures Pictures*, is to examine more closely and to explore for myself the implications of Cavendish's desire for fame, uniqueness, and recognised virtue, and the ways in which the dynamic conflict of her opposing motivations produced the dance of retreat and



advance by which Cavendish tried to proclaim herself while declaring that she remained modest and retiring. Through analysis of her views of women's options I hope to contribute to a fuller understanding of her work.

## Critical Perceptions

---

As such an early and prolific female author Cavendish is an obvious focus for contemporary women seeking literary predecessors, yet her work is not widely known. Indeed historically Cavendish seems most famous for being a forgotten writer: it is surprising to find how many traces she has left while barely rippling the surface of popular consciousness. First among the factors contributing to her neglect is the inaccessibility of her works, which were reprinted during her lifetime but have seldom been reissued since her death. Charles Lamb lamented their scarcity more than a century and a half ago when writing about the lasting qualities of book-bindings:

where a book is at once both good and rare—where the individual is almost the species, and then *that* perishes,

We know not where is that Promethean torch

That can its light relumine—

such a book, for instance, as the *Life of the Duke of Newcastle*, by his Duchess—no casket is rich enough, no casing sufficiently durable, to honour and keep safe such a jewel.<sup>3</sup>

Microfilm is making Cavendish's works available to academics, but there is still no edition of her writing for popular or student use. Facsimile editions such as the Scholar Press reprint of *Sociable Letters* are of great assistance to scholars, but are still, mainly by

---

3 (Lamb: 247.) This factor was made more poignant when an acquaintance borrowed Lamb's copy of Cavendish's letters and went abroad without returning it (Lamb: 279).

virtue of their undiluted seventeenth-century typography, off limits to most readers. This problem is compounded by the current unfamiliarity of Stuart writing styles: although sections of Cavendish's books are a pleasure to read, a critic like Perry has gone so far as to call them "for the most part extremely tedious" (Perry: 3). The modern reader will often concur with Cavendish's contemporary reputation as a crank, although for very different reasons: her views of gender and creativity are paradoxical and internally contradictory, sitting uncomfortably with the notions of her time yet bearing too much of their seventeenth century context with them to be at ease in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Is it possible that the Duchess's contemporaries judged her by her unconventional behaviour and that today we judge her according to her nonsensical philosophy that conformed to the notions of her time? (Blaydes *in* Mell: 55).

References to Cavendish and her work fall into two general strands. Both regard her as an oddity, but one praises her vigour and gift for a well-turned phrase while the other harshly criticises her scatter-brained works and her presumption in writing at all. She appears in the diaries of Pepys and Evelyn as a focus of spectacle, while Mrs. Evelyn writes in a letter that the Duchess's discourse "is airy, empty, whimsical, and rambling as her books, aiming at scientific difficulties, high notions, terminating commonly in nonsense, oaths, and obscenity".<sup>4</sup>

Bathsua Makin, in contrast, presented her as an eminent and original woman: "The present Dutchess of *New Castle*, by her own

---

4 (Quoted in Wheatley: 194.) Pepys's references to her are in his *Diary* entries for March 30, 1667; April 11, 1667; May 1, 1667; and March 18, 1668.

Genius, rather than any timely Instruction, over-tops many grave Gown-Men" (Makin: 10). Much later Charles Lamb adored her works, calling her "the thrice noble, chaste, and virtuous,—but again somewhat fantastical, and original-brain'd, generous Margaret Newcastle" (Lamb: 82); while Robertson in the 1883 anthology *English Poetesses* patronised them.<sup>5</sup>

In 1886 Cavendish's *Life* of her husband was reprinted with an introductory editorial essay by Sir Charles Firth which discusses the life of the husband, the project of the biography, and the writings of the wife. The standard double biography of both Cavendishes appeared in 1918 when Henry Ten Eyck Perry published his Harvard doctoral thesis as *The First Duchess of Newcastle and her Husband as Figures in Literary History*. Woolf mentions Cavendish in both *A Room of One's Own*, where she claims that the Duchess's anger at her role irreparably marred her work (Woolf 1928), and *The Common Reader* of 1925 in which she echoed Lamb: "There is something noble and Quixotic and high-spirited, as well as crack-brained and bird-witted, about her" (Woolf 1925: 108).

It was also in 1925 that R. W. Goulding, a librarian from the Cavendish estate of Welbeck Abbey, published *Margaret (Lucas) Duchess of Newcastle*. In 1938 A. S. Turberville produced the first volume in *A History of Welbeck Abbey and its Owners*, which includes much on the first Duke and Duchess. Apart from the works by Woolf, these are all difficult texts to locate: Canterbury

---

5 Robertson is, however, patronising about all the women who appear in his book, probably as a result of his belief that "Women have always been inferior to men as writers of poetry; and they always will be" (Robertson: xii-xvi).

holds the 1886 *Life*, but others such as the Goulding are not available in New Zealand.<sup>6</sup>

Since these works there has been a major biography by Douglas Grant in 1956 which examined Cavendish's writings and thinking as well as the events of her life, and a sprinkling of articles by critics such as Jean Gagen. Interest in Cavendish quickened in the mid-80s, and since then there have been more—though still not many—words of commentary written about her. The recent spate of anthologies of early women's writing has done much to increase Cavendish's public profile, but there is nowhere for the interested reader to go to read more of the words of this fascinating writer. A biography by Kathleen Jones called *A Glorious Fame* was published in 1988.

### **Cavendish and modern feminism**

With her ambivalences and desire to transcend the Other situation of women Cavendish fits uneasily into feminist history. Her work and thinking were, however, part of a preparatory and perhaps necessary stage before modern feminisms could be conceived. 'Successful' women like Cavendish who pre-date the last couple of centuries and have something to say about their position as women are sometimes called proto-feminists, a term which recognises that although they espoused ideas which are often foreign (and

---

6 The introduction to Douglas Grant's biography discusses the sources which were of most use to him, when he wrote in 1956. In addition to these books, articles on Cavendish turn up in the strangest places: *The Bulletin of the West Virginia Association of College English Teachers*, which is, unfortunately, not held anywhere in New Zealand, has published at least three articles on Cavendish since 1977, the first being a reprint of Jean Gagen's article from *Studies in Philology*.

sometimes anathema) to most modern feminisms, they were the precursors who in their various ways laid the groundwork.

In the decade past Cavendish has been rediscovered by women seeking their own literary history as the development of women's writing has been the focus of theoretical framing. Responses to this most unruly of ancestors have been mixed and perplexed, often showing a strong desire to make of her an early feminist heroine struggling womanfully to express herself as she questioned the social fetters which bound her and her sisters. It would be pleasing to be able to concur with this image of Cavendish. Her writings, however, will not allow it except by means of selective quotation. The Cavendish who produced the texts is a far more complex and contradictory figure who presented alternately views which we might now call feminist and misogynist. As a result, few would unequivocally claim her as a model; those who do see her as a modern heroine focus on certain of her statements and ignore others. Those who look more closely at the documents display marked ambivalence: Sara Heller Mendelson's view that Cavendish was an egoist who happened to be female is certainly more provocative an exploration of the texts than is Dale Spender's unconditional acceptance.<sup>7</sup>

Yet Cavendish's admixture of defensiveness and brash arrogance, anger at the place of women and desire to herself transcend—through escape or distillation of its essence—women's lot, shows aspects of the project of women's self-construction which are often

---

7 Sara Heller Mendelson's *The Mental World of Stuart Women: Three Studies* contrasts strongly with Dale Spender's glowing references to Cavendish in *Mothers of the Novel*.

elided in the works of her more straightforwardly feminist near-contemporaries. Cavendish saw much that has formed the basis of modern feminisms, but she was, as a royalist, no believer in equality or fundamental human rights and was deeply sensitive as to the benefits which gender and class divisions of power offered to privileged women such as herself. She did not successfully resolve the tensions between the various options she saw for women: she offers no coherent theory, and was all too eager to show different interpretations of the same events. Although Cavendish expresses a desire for unity within her texts, her inability or unwillingness to reconcile her various views of the world into a unified whole directed her into fragmented and polyvocal modes of discourse. It is tempting to say that in this Cavendish offers an alternative to phallogocentric attempts to construct unities, but such a reading is too much a modern imposition.

## Context and Text: the Woman and the Writing

---

Margaret Cavendish's work is noteworthy largely because of the time and circumstances in which it was written. Cavendish was among the first women to write for publication in English, and her writing constantly struggles between accepting and challenging the dominant ideas which cast the thinker-writer as male and women as (potentially inspirational) Other. In order to understand the nature of her project and the paradoxes in her writing it is necessary to appreciate the events which shaped the author and, through her, the text.<sup>8</sup>

Margaret Lucas was the youngest child of a family from that aspiring class of lesser gentry whose service to royalty and knack for marrying and managing money enabled them to set themselves up in family seats built from the stones of dissolved monasteries.<sup>9</sup> Lucas men had been lawyers, Members of Parliament, and High

---

8 The main sources of biographical information are her own "true Relation" in *Natures Pictures*, and the biographies by Grant and Jones.

9 Richard Whalley, the first secular owner of Welbeck Abbey, which was to become Cavendish's home in later life, was another from the same class. "A man clearly of great energy and ambition, he was typical of those persons of enterprise and business capacity belonging to the upper middle class of the community who made themselves so useful to the Tudors, and who succeeded by their native wits in obtaining both power and affluence" (Turberville: 4). The descendants of Owen Tudor were themselves royal without having been noble, and had much in common with this useful class of dedicated social climbers.



Sheriffs of Essex during the Tudor reigns.<sup>10</sup> Their religious sympathies were staunchly High Church of England and strongly interwoven with their royalism. Having wealth and some of the largest land-holdings in Colchester the Lucases lacked only the mellowness of time and the security of a title. Oddly, they did not buy a title, although in later life Cavendish was anxious to assure her readers that this was because they disdained to purchase with money in peacetime that which should be earned by valour in war.

Her father died in 1625 when Margaret was still an infant,<sup>11</sup> and her mother's control of the estate set an example of a woman engaged in traditionally male employments. The family group was close and closed, holding itself aloof and discouraging familiarity with servants or neighbours. The Lucases were fervent Royalists in a clothmaking area which they helped to make equally fervently Parliamentary: they alienated the people of Colchester by their appropriation of profitable new rights of land-ownership, their support of High Church clergy in a predominantly Protestant area, and their zealous collection of ship money for the King (Jones: 18). Tension became mob violence directed at the Lucas estate, and in

---

10 The Lucas association with parliament and the law lends a certain irony to Cavendish's later distrust of politicians and lawyers. Although she grew up in a class which had benefited from both these institutions, her family's increasing identification with the royalist establishment, her husband's slightly-less-nouveau approach to such things, and her personal distaste for faction and false-seeming all turned her against the forms of social climbing which had got her and her family where they were. Having achieved the goal of 'nobility' it was necessary to erase the traces of having sought such status.

11 Records were destroyed during the Civil War, so the date of Cavendish's birth is not known. It is generally assumed to be either 1623 or 1624, although some have proposed a date as late as 1626.

1642 the family's fortunes were ruined when the house and chapel were sacked, valuables stolen, and the family dispossessed.

Cavendish was raised in a family where "all the Brothers were Valiant, and all the Sisters virtuous"<sup>12</sup>: desiring to be both valiant and virtuous, she walked a precarious path through the gender dichotomies of her time. Her childhood, which fostered a strangely wild sobriety in her family's closed world, did not prepare her for the feminine duties of needlework and household management. She was steeped in fantasy, well able to amuse herself with stories and costumes of her own devising, acutely observant of what went on around her when she turned her mind to it—although she was not socially adept and her observations of all but her domestic life often resemble an anthropologist's view of an unknown culture—and at other times either tensely bewildered or oblivious.

The Lucases joined other dispossessed royalists at Oxford, where Margaret became a Maid of Honour to Queen Henrietta Maria. Her upbringing had not equipped her to cope with court life, and the placement at court was not happy. Aware that any action could be misconstrued, she says she was frightened into silence, choosing rather "to be accounted a Fool, than to be thought mad or wanton" (NP: 374). Her lack of social grace and concern with virtue reduced her to hesitation and silence in court society.

In 1644 the Queen left England to return to her native France. Margaret Lucas went with her. It would be fifteen years before the Queen's Court returned to England.

---

12 These words are found in the epitaph on Cavendish's tomb in Westminster Abbey, paraphrasing her own words on her upbringing.

A factor in the Queen's retreat was the loss of the crucial battle of Marston Moor. William Cavendish, the archetypal Cavalier and one of the generals in the battle, left England immediately afterwards as a result, to be alternately favoured as a loyalist and disparaged as an incompetent until after the Restoration. Margaret, with her fervid royalism, saw William Cavendish as a hero. She met him in 1645 and married him that same year, claiming she was unable to help herself: "though I did dread Marriage, and shunn'd Mens companies, as much as I could, yet I could not, nor had not the power to refuse him, by reason my Affections were fix'd on him, and he was the only person I ever was in love with" (NP: 375).

The marriage was of prime importance to Cavendish's writing, although it was not viewed with favour at court or by the five surviving children of William Cavendish's first marriage to the heiress Elizabeth Bassat, who were the same age as their new stepmother. William Cavendish had varied interests and an affinity for high romance: his true gift was horsemanship, on which topic he wrote the leading text of the age, but in addition to training his horses he wrote poetry and plays, patronised the arts, dabbled in the natural philosophy which so engaged his brother Charles, and had—at least until his marriage to Margaret—a reputation as a womaniser.

Given the similarity of interests and attitudes which first attracted the Cavendishes to each other, and the reported closeness of their marriage, it is not surprising that Clarendon's description of William Cavendish provides parallels to the views on monarchy,

the Church, and the control of faction which Cavendish herself expressed in her texts:

He was a very fine gentleman, active and full of courage, and most accomplished in those qualities of horsemanship, dancing, and fencing which accompany a good breeding; in which his delight was. Besides that, he was amorous in poetry and music, to which he indulged the greatest part of his time; and nothing could have tempted him out of those paths of pleasure, which he enjoyed in a full and ample fortune, but honour and ambition to serve the King, when he saw him in distress, and abandoned by most of those who were in the highest degree obliged to him, and by him. He loved monarchy, as it was the foundation and support of his own greatness; and the Church, as it was well constituted for the splendour and security of the Crown; and religion, as it cherished and maintained that order and obedience that was necessary to both; without any other passion for the particular opinions which were grown up in it, and distinguished it into parties, than as he detested whatsoever was like to disturb the public peace.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to what Cavendish and history describe as the usual situation in marriage, William Cavendish encouraged his young wife's writing, did not expect her to take the usual domestic and managerial role, contributed to her intellectual growth, spun fancies and fantasies with her, and paid to have at least some of her

---

13 This passage from Clarendon's *Rebellion* is quoted in the editor's introduction to *The Life of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle* by Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle, edited by C. H. Firth. The same quotation from Clarendon occurs in Perry (42-4), in a most useful discussion of the life of William Cavendish which brings together for comparison the biography written by Margaret Cavendish and the historical evidence as known when he wrote. Perry reads the biography as "a literary product as well as an authentic history," noting that "[i]t was written, too, in a period when fictitious material was beginning to masquerade as veracious record" (Perry: 5). For further reading on the career of William Cavendish see Firth's introductory essay and the first two chapters of Perry's account.

books published. Cavendish's need for self-expression through writing was evident from an early age—she mentions adolescent writings which she calls baby books—but she would have found publication far more difficult had her husband not supported her endeavour.

While William was certainly a factor in the volume of work Cavendish published, his influence on its quality is less commendable. The well-bred hobbyist's disdain for hard work and revision which he encouraged in Cavendish both increased her output and prevented her from polishing her work. It was sufficient for one of his class to display the seeds of talent, and show that he could have been passing good had he turned his mind to it. Taking an endeavour seriously showed a lack of grace and style, and might reveal flaws in one's ability: William of Newcastle was a dabbler who showed a superficial interest in many things. To Cavendish this was encouragement to spill her thoughts out on the page without giving thought to the process of reworking which might have smoothed her writing.

William Cavendish, Earl and then Marquis of Newcastle, had been fabulously wealthy before sinking most of his resources into supporting the King and then abandoning what remained when he fled England. In Europe the exiles led a financially precarious existence, borrowing money wherever they could to support the public display which was thought to befit the court: at one stage Cavendish narrowly avoided pawning her gowns to buy food by pawning her maid's jewelry, her own having been sold long since. The small household passed the years in lodgings (some grand, some not) in Paris, Antwerp, and Rotterdam. Cavendish herself,

whose exile was voluntary and who could travel freely, returned to London for a year in 1652-3 with the intention of petitioning Parliament for some part of her husband's sequestered estates as support. But Cavendish had married her Cavalier after his "delinquency" and the Commissioners determined that he had no estates at the time of the marriage and there was therefore nothing for Margaret to claim.

The year in England was productive in other ways, though. The time was spent with her sisters and her husband's brother Charles, a friend as well as relative whose interest in science was instrumental to the development of Cavendish's views on natural philosophy.<sup>14</sup> In London Cavendish began to write poetry and arranged to have some of her writings published. These appeared in 1653 as *Poems and Fancies* and *Philosophical Fancies*. They may have been published partly as a money-making venture, although the reasons Cavendish gave in her first introductions were more to do with writing being a "harmless pastime" which kept her occupied since she had no children to raise and no estates to tend.<sup>15</sup>

---

14 Charles Cavendish was involved in the founding of the Royal Society. Cavendish describes him in glowing terms, making a memorial to him in her autobiography:

He was nobly generous, wisely valiant, naturally civill, honestly kind, truly loving, vertuously temperate, his promise was like a fixed decree, his words were destiny, his life was holy, his disposition milde, his behaviour courteous, his discourse pleasing, he had a ready wit and a spacious knowledge, a settled judgement, a cleer understanding, a rationall insight, he was leaned in all Arts and Sciences, but especially in the Mathematicks, in which study he spent most part of his time; and though his tongue preacht not Moral Phylosophy, yet his life taught it, indeed he was such a person, that he might have been a pattern for all mankind to take (NP: 378).

15 Firth's introductory essay quotes at length from Cavendish's own introductions (Firth: xxx-xxxi).

Cavendish continued to write after returning to her husband in Antwerp, and the manuscripts were sent to her publisher in London, one being lost in the sea voyage. Two books followed in 1655, and in 1656 Cavendish produced *Natures Pictures*, her last book from exile before the Restoration.

The years in Europe exposed Cavendish to a confusing range of influences. She spoke no French, and spent many years linguistically isolated from the people around her. Her husband and maid, Elizabeth Chaplain, were her main company, and she turned again to her thoughts and fancies. Yet here and there she met English-speakers whose interests chimed with hers: some few wealthy, well-educated women, and the thinkers like Hobbes and Descartes who were asked to dine at the Cavendish table. These contacts encouraged her ideas and introduced her to a scattered range of European thought which coloured her writing.

Analysis of the Cavendish marriage from the texts is, however, a source of some unease. Cavendish first began to publish in the year she was alone in London. She concluded her writing career five years before she died, and after writing the biography of her husband which has historically been considered her crowning work she wrote nothing new but produced plentiful revised editions of works she'd written previously but not published (or not published separately) before that time. William's authorial presence in Cavendish's texts is also awkward: his contributions to *Natures Pictures* introduce the text and turn up sporadically through it but seldom meld with the rest of the work. William's concerns are different, his language more conventionally ornate and more specific of names and locations, his presence perplexing as he

interrupts his wife's story of the she-Anchoret with "The severall and various opinions, whether a Cat seeth in the night, or no?"

With the Restoration the Cavendishes returned to England where they were elevated to a Duchy but failed to achieve the place in the centre of Court life which they felt was due to them in recognition of the services William had rendered during the War. After a time they retired to their estates at Welbeck and a life of literary and domestic bliss which was marred by problems with her husband's family and associates. There was conflict with the younger generation of Newcastles over the undue influence their stepmother exerted over their father each time he increased her jointure in the certain knowledge that he would predecease his young wife. After the return to England the finances of the Newcastle estates were managed by Francis Topp, husband to Cavendish's waiting-woman Elizabeth Chaplain, who as well as being the Duchess's man was an astute middle-class accountant who did not sympathise with the traditional ways of the estate. Tenants and young Newcastles found him unsympathetic and unbribable and detested him, and both he and Elizabeth left the Cavendishes' service in 1669. In spite of her apparent unworldliness Cavendish had garnered from her mother enough knowledge of book-keeping to audit the accounts from then on, and contributed to her local unpopularity by catching employees taking bribes. The resulting scandal was nothing compared to the consequent smear campaign's allegations of unchastity on her part: although the conspiracy was uncovered, such allegations went hard with a woman so concerned with her virtue.



Both Duchess and Duke published and had plays performed in London, where Cavendish's occasional visits attracted so much attention. Her health had been a matter of importance and concern since her failure to produce children in the early years of her marriage. Taking little heed of doctors except when they agreed with her, Cavendish continued in her extremely abstemious lifestyle, eating little, never exercising to the point where she worked up a sweat, and purging herself more often than her doctors thought wise. In December 1673 she was found dead: she was perhaps barely fifty. Her husband survived her in octogenarian frailty for two years, writing poems about her and gathering eulogies to be published in a book of praise.

## Natures Pictures: The Text

---

*Natures Pictures drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life* is particularly significant among Cavendish's writings, and among early writing by women, for containing Cavendish's autobiography: a document of self-construction and self-presentation which reveals much about her as a woman and a writer. The overt autobiography is not, however, the only self-writing in the text, since the project of shaping the work was for Cavendish a statement of her self and her creative power, and because Cavendish appears in her texts as fantasy heroine and knowledgeable commentator. The work is a reiterative process of self-creation and display which reveals and contradicts its images of the author. Venturing from fiction with strong autobiographical overtones, through analogy and natural philosophy, and eventually to "a true Story at the latter end, wherein there is no Feignings" *Natures Pictures* would seem to be a journey towards truth. The final word is not, however, the final word, since the tensions within the writing undermine aspects of what it claims to say and, anticlimactically, various stories are appended at the end with instructions on where in the main text they were supposed to go.

The book itself is a collection of over 100 pieces of writing of varying lengths, styles, and subjects which Cavendish divided into eleven books, prefaced by a series of letters to the reader and bracketed with two scrap-heaps of pieces which disorganisation or printing difficulties kept from their intended places in the main text. The books have different flavours and concerns, showing a

general progression from light collections of stories, through more-sustained narratives and scientific discussions, to the culminating autobiographical narrative. The final collection of bits and pieces provides a most appropriate anti-climax.

*Natures Pictures* has a rambling structure and is relatively unknown. The fact that, like most texts of the time, it has no table of contents makes appreciation of the work—if one is lucky enough to find a copy—difficult, so I have compiled a full list of contents which may be found in Appendix B. A briefer summary of the work follows.

*Natures Pictures* is dedicated “to Pastime”, that the readers’ time may be spent pleasantly and profitably in perusing the book. After the dedication come two letters in rhyming couplets in which William Cavendish commends his wife’s work, and six letters from Margaret Cavendish explaining and excusing the writing which will follow.

“The first Part” of “Her Excellencies Comical Tales in Prose” shows signs of being a late addition to the text. In it, three discourses and a tale are gathered together in an unlikely grouping on unnumbered pages.

With “The first Book” (NP: 1-102 of “Her Excellencies Tales in Verse”) the text starts moving. After a final introduction we are told that a group of people sitting around a fire in winter decided to tell stories: this traditional technique provides a rationale for the 40 stories and linking passages in the book, which reply to each other in a winding discussion of love, constancy, and civil war. The narration roughly alternates between male and female, with the

men declaring that women's constancy lies in their willingness to die for love, and the women responding with more pragmatic, survival-oriented stories about the realities of life for women. The final three pieces are from the pen of William Cavendish.

After yet another letter to the reader Cavendish launches into "The second Book": "Her Excellencies Comical Tales in Prose" (NP: 105-127). This collection of 11 tales addresses issues of marriage, scholarship, and comparative politics, and shows a more cynical view of these subjects than did the first book.

"The third Book" is a continuation of the second book, but with an increasingly more serious tone. Beginning with a tale of men who find their inspiration in drunken visions, the book goes on to tell how study of the arts and sciences can be a consolation for love lost, follows the adventures of souls freed from the body in death or a swoon, and eases into extended, plotless analogy. The final pieces of the book are a description of atoms, showing strongly Cavendish's analogic mode of thought, and "The Preaching Lady", in which a woman takes for her sermon a text from nature.

There is a change of pace in ""The fourth Book", which tells "Her Excellencies Moral Tales in Prose". These six beast-fables convey messages about politics and philosophy of life. The tales offer different interpretations of the same act, unlike the conventional fable which neatly ties its message into a single moral.

"The fifth Book" comprises "Her Excellencies Dialogues in Prose": three dialogues presenting different views of mores, mind and the good life. Of the seven speakers, six are women, and the dialogue form permits Cavendish the polylogic discourse she favours.

"The sixth Book" is a single extended story called "The Contract". The wider range of the tale allows development of character as well as discussion of philosophical ideas, but for once these don't interfere with the progression of the plot. "The Contract" tells of a young woman's breeding, and her courtship of the man who has married another after being betrothed to her in her childhood. "The Ambitious Traytor" is a much shorter story which is the whole of "The seventh Book". A noble man is discovered in a plot to overthrow the king, and at his execution explains that his actions were appropriate to his aspiring human nature. It is one of Cavendish's contradictions that she could make sympathetic a character which went so far against her statist bias.

Another introductory letter introduces "The eight Book" [sic], "Assaulted and pursued Chastity". This Odyssean tale describes in extraordinary detail the adventures of Affectionata-Travelia as she/he survives a bawdy-house attempted rape, shipwrecks, famine, strange cultures which would sacrifice her or marry her to the local leader, illness, and war, in her flight from the Prince of Sensuality who pursues her throughout the story and whom she finally marries.

"The ninth Book" is "The Tale of a Traveller", in which a young man leaves the stale learning of the university to see the world for himself, and after trying and discarding architecture, law, gambling and whoring, Court, and war, returns home to his estate to play at farming. Unable to make a profit because his servants cheat him when he's not watching, he takes the advice of a wise old woman, reduces his retinue to a level where he can observe all that they do,

and courts a virtuous young wife to live with him in sober comfort. A small realm can be ruled absolutely.

"The tenth Book" is "The she-Anchoret", which fills 76 pages with advice from one of Cavendish's superwoman heroines (this time a contemplative one) to "Naturall Philosophers, Physicians: Moral Philosophers, Theological Students, Preachers, or Judges, Tradesmen, Masters of Families, Married-men, and their Wives, Nurses, Widowers, and Widows, Virgins, Lovers, Poets, and Aged Persons, and Souldiers" (NP: 287). Eventually jarred from her preaching by the attentions of a demanding neighbouring King, the she-Anchoret kills herself to protect her country from war. Running on from this is "Heavens Library, which is Fames Palace purged from Errors and Vices" in which the Gods cleanse their library of all undeserving books.

Still another epistle begins "The Eleventh Book", introducing Cavendish's autobiographical account: "A true Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life."

To conclude the book there is a scrap-heap of passages—a letter, some stories—which belong in the main body of the text and have directions to their rightful places, a final epistle to the book's readers to make allowances for the book's flaws, a sonnet on fame, and the errata.

## The second Book.

---

### **Mortal Bodies: Immortal Fame**

---

I confess my Ambition is restless, and not ordinary; because it would have an extraordinary fame: And since all heroick Actions, publick Employments, powerfull Governments, and eloquent Pleadings are denyed our Sex in this age, or at least would be condemned for want of custome, is the cause I write so much (NP: An Epistle, A13).

Margaret Cavendish wrote as a creative act which displayed her self to others while giving her direction and delight. She wanted to be famous, inheriting from Renaissance humanism the idea that one had to be known and remembered to be fully human. This chapter will examine the reasons for the importance of fame and for her choice of writing as the way to achieve her own personal immortality.

#### **Mind, Body, Fame and Immortality**

Time would take the physical body, marring youthful beauty and eventually returning it to inanimate matter. That was the fate of beasts. Man, the rational animal, had for centuries been thought to consist of a spiritual essence as well as a material body. The existence and fate of that essence were matters of philosophical debate which form a recurring motif in *Natures Pictures*, as in a story where the Chief Commanders of the Army summarise one of Cavendish's reasons for writing, declaring that:

all Souls did dye  
 But those that liv'd in Fame or Infamy.  
 Those that Infamous were, without all doubt  
 Were damn'd, and from reproach should ne'er get out:  
 But such whose Fame their Noble Deeds did raise,  
 Their Souls were blest with an Eternal Praise;  
 And those that dy'd, and never mention'd were,  
 They thought their Souls breath'd out to nought but Air  
 (NP: 72).

Those who were not remembered ceased to be, dissolving into oblivion. But Cavendish was not content to echo her she-Anchoret's father: "dye I must | My soul must fly, my body turn to dust": she made and published artifacts of herself in pursuit of an immortality which would make her more than merely a body subject to time (NP: 287). In view of her ambition to achieve lasting fame it is important to examine Cavendish's concepts of the person and of immortality to see why she so feared oblivion and how she hoped to circumvent it.

### **The Cavendishian Person**

Cavendish's work blends Cartesian dualism with popular Christianity in describing the person as an ethereal mind/spirit attached to a physical body: the ghost inhabiting and having a special relation of nurturance and entrapment with the machine of its fleshly vehicle. Parallel to this division of mind/spirit and body is Cavendish's opposition between the inside of the self, including qualities of character and intelligence such as Merit, Worth and Wit, and the external public appearance of "Title, Wealth, Power or Person" (NP: 375). Cavendish very clearly values the internal more than the external, denigrating the physical world in favour of



a world of thoughts and worthy spirits since it is "an injustice... to esteem the Body more than the Minde" (NP: 388-9), but this hierarchy is unsettled by the idea of the precivilised noble savage and the importance of appearance to women.<sup>16</sup>

### Beasts and Bodies

The mixed responses to bodies which are a feature of *Natures Pictures* are shown most clearly in stories and discussions which utilise beasts as examples of bodies without souls. On the one hand animals are Other to humans because they are noble savages still living in a Golden Age of pastoral innocence which humans have lost through the taint of civilisation. The very mental attributes which are claimed to raise the human animal above other animals also lead to plotting, scheming, over-intellectualisation and falsification:

beasts follow the Lawes of Nature, but men followes their own Lawes, which make them more miserable than nature intended them to be. Beasts do not destroy themselves, nor make they Lawes to intangle themselves in the netts of long, and strong suites, but follow that which pleaseth them most. Unless men vex them, they weary not themselves, in unprofitable labours, nor vex their brain with vain phantasmes; they have no superstitious fear, nor vain curiosity, to seek after that, which when they have found, are never the better; nor strange opinions, to carry them from the truth; nor Rhetorick to perswade them out of the right way. And when beasts prey upon one another, it is out of meer hunger; not to make spoil, as man, who is so disorderly as that he strive, to destroy nature herself (NP: 216).

---

<sup>16</sup> Although the terminology may be Rousseau's, the idea of noble savagery was around long before his formulation of it.

Beasts are driven by the necessities of survival and do not aspire beyond such necessities. Humans, by contrast, do so aspire: it is one of Cavendish's ironies that she can express nostalgia for the simple life of the body while struggling so hard to transcend it. For although following nature's laws did not lead to a world of peace and harmony where the lion lay down with the lamb, it did, in Cavendish's opinion, avoid a world of gratuitous violence and spoil. The amorality of fulfilling needs is presented as more wholesome than certain human moralities, as when the spider defends its web, saying:

what Creature hath Nature made, but if they had power  
would not defend themselves; but say, I spun this Web only  
to catch the Flyes to feed upon, it were no crime in Nature;  
for what Creature is there that will spare the life of another, if  
it be to maintain his own, since Self-preservation is the chief  
of Natures Works; and of all her Works, Man fecks it most;  
and not only so, but they delight in Spoyl, which is against  
Nature; for doth not Man take Delight, and account it as one  
of his chieftest Recreations to kill those Creatures that he  
refuses to eat (NP: 171).<sup>17</sup>

The other view of beasts and the body assumes that animals are brutes tied to the world of flesh who live only for sensual pleasures and die without fame "following their Appetites without Rules" (NP: 178). Animals—murkily prone to uncontrolled urges and the scourges of aging and illness—act as foils for the rationality and control which characterise humans. In the old-fashioned chain of

---

<sup>17</sup> The comments on spoil are a reminder that Cavendish wrote an unusual poem about the recreation of hunting from the point of view of the hunted hare. This poem is anthologised in *Kissing the Rod* (ed. Greer et al: 168-72) where it is noted that Cavendish elsewhere described herself as "as fearefull as a Hare" (Cavendish, *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 167; quoted in Greer et al: 172).

being which extended from God to the animals, the mind was what made humans like unto angels, differentiating them from the soulless beasts which lacked a rational faculty (*anima prima*). This view is particularly important to Cavendish's writing because there had long been debate over whether or not women had this rational faculty: whether Eve too shared in Adam's gift of a divine soul, or whether women were some superior variety of breeding animal.<sup>18</sup> Although rarely expressed in such absolute terms in Cavendish's day, she still—as a woman writing and philosophising—had to deal with the idea that women were not fully rational and not fully human. The association of women with animals genders and colours her discussion of beasts and bodies, since Cavendish's strategy to escape being classified as a body involves her in the excessive exaltation of the mind (which defines the "real" human). Paradoxically, however, the basic assumptions still hold: women, like beasts, were judged primarily for their appearance and

---

18 The varied perceptions of women in philosophy which followed from the work of Aristotle are detailed in *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution 750 BC—AD 1250* by Prudence Allen. Her discussions of the (contradictory) works of St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas are of particular interest to the questions regarding women's rational abilities. Aquinas, for instance, thought that the sexes were equally capable of the infused wisdom of contemplation on the level of grace, but on the level of nature his perception of women is summarised as "Weak in reason, less capable of intellectual virtues, silence" (Allen: 386). Augustine accepted a woman, Monica, as a follower and philosopher, but his references to her are full of the way she transcends her female body. On hearing the words of Cicero "she so spoke out, that, unmindful of her sex, we might think that some great man was seated with us, I, in the meantime, understanding from what source, and from how divine a source these things flowed" (Augustine, quoted in Allen: 229). Rather than accepting her ideas as her own, Augustine interprets them as a sign that she is a vessel for a (male) power external to herself.

The continuing debate on women is mentioned in the pamphlet *Esther hath hanged Haman*; written by Esther Sowerman in 1617: "being at supper amongst friends where the number of each sex were equal, as nothing is more usual for table talk there fell out a discourse concerning women, some defending, others objecting against our Sex" (quoted by Henderson & McManus: 218-9).

productivity, and as a woman Cavendish was led to focus on the outward appearance of the body in her pursuit of fame.

Some sort of identification with animals may have motivated Cavendish to have her she-Anchoret defend their claim to rational souls on the grounds of natural justice, since it would not be fair for one sort of animal to be given such a quality if the others were not:

Then they asked her if she thought beasts had a rational soul. She answered, that if there could be no sense without some reason, nor reason without the sense, beasts were rationally as men; unless, said she, reason be a particular gift, either from nature, or the God of Nature to man, and not to other creatures, if so, said she, Nature or the God of Nature would prove partiall or finite; as for Nature in her self she seems unconfined, and for the God of Nature, he can have no byas, he ruling everything by the straight line of Justice; and what Justice, nay, injustice would it not be for mankind to be supreme over all other animall kinde: some animall kinde over any other kinde (NP: 316).

The alternative equalising approach, bringing men to the brutish level of animals, is suggested in "The Dialogue of the Wise Lady, the Learned Lady, and the Witty Lady":

*Learning.* Some Moral Philosophers hold, that no Creature hath Reason but Man.

*Wisdom.* Men onely talk of Reason, but live like Beasts, following their Appetites without Rules (NP: 177-8).

Cavendish, however, instead of staying with the notion that humans are like beasts, veers off to mention human desire and the basis of ever-reaching ambition in a way which pre-dates Lacan by nearly three centuries:

*Wit.* Men may as soon set Rules to Eternity as to themselves; for their Desires are so infinite and so intricate, that we may as soon measure Eternity as them; for Desires are like Time, still run forward; and what is past, is as it had never been (NP: 178).

In the final analysis it is aspiration, that same desire for more which also motivates the spoil Cavendish so detests, which distinguishes the 'real people' in her work. In an increasingly skeptical ideological climate it was not so much what one might or might not have that conferred full humanity, but what one did and how the mask of one's persona was constructed and presented.

### **The Separable Soul and Body – Death and Love**

Cavendish, ambivalent as ever, still had uses for the notion of the separable body and soul, though. Having lost so many things in the physical world she found it a comfort to have the non-physical to turn to for solace, and 'astral travel' was a most handy plot device.

This ethereal essence of self—the animate matter—is composed of rational matter which she called *Minde*, and sensitive matter which makes up the more general Soul, although Cavendish's cleavage of the world into matter and minds is complex, and she does not always use terms distinctly. "Soul" and "Spirit" describe a life-force which is the location of the self, but Cavendish also uses "Spirit" synonymously with "*Minde*," which incorporates the rational component and is the "developed" self. In general, Cavendish writes of Souls or Spirits in her romance-based tales and *Mindes* in her scientific analogies and fables: "Soul" describes the more emotional and spiritual aspect, while "*Minde*" is what we would call the mental or intellectual side. For practical purposes

the two are often interchangeable, although Mindes are more likely to argue philosophy while Souls engage in the melodrama of love. Thus Cavendish speaks of “the infinite matter of nature, that is, the soul, life and body of nature; the sensitive and rational being the quintessence, spirit or purity of nature, but the other part a more gross and senseless matter”.<sup>19</sup>

The separability of soul and body is shown in those situations where the body appears to be left “uninhabited”—in unconsciousness and death—so that although Cavendish shows little interest in how souls come to be, she does speculate on what might happen to them when they leave the body: her favoured post-mortal alternatives being that they go to a heaven, wander the earth, live in Elysium, or dissolve into nothingness. Souls also depart the body to travel, either in the dramatic swoons into which her characters sometimes fall on receiving bad news, or with the help of drugs, as when a witch tells the man she will take to the centre of the earth that:

your Body will be too cumbersome; wherefore we will leave that behinde, that you may go the lighter, as being all Spirit. So she went out, and came and brought a Dish of *Opium*, and prayed him to eat well thereof; so he eat very heartily; and when he had done, his senses grew very heavy, insomuch as his Body fell down, as in a swoond, remaining without sense; in the mean while, his Spirit stole out, and left the Body asleep (NP: 145).

Dreams might also provide opportunities for the soul to wander. Yet although the spirit and body might be separated, they are still most closely bound and influential on each other, for:

---

<sup>19</sup> Cavendish *Philosophical Opinions*, 1663: c2; quoted in Grant: 197-8.

Nature hath the Soul so fix'd  
 Unto the Body, and such Passions mix'd,  
 That nothing can divide or dis-unite,  
 Unless that Death will separate them quite (NP: 86).

This line of reasoning suggests that the body is responsible for a large part of the shaping of the person, an idea which Cavendish picks up elsewhere since, for all that it is supposedly untainted by the physical world, the soul is not in fact immutable, being conditioned by breeding and stained by life:

as all Bodyes that are young, want strength,  
 And wait for time to give them bredth and length;  
 So doth the Soul want understanding too,  
 And knows not what is best to think or do:

\* \* \* \* \*

But Age oft times as faulty as Youths be  
 Corrupted with bad principles they see;  
 And length of time and Custome makes them shew  
 As if in Man they naturally grew (NP: 78).

The soul and mind are also affected by ills much like those which affect the body. "Of the Indispositions of the Minde" is a tale in which plot gives way to argument among moral philosophers about which physical illnesses are most apt as metaphors for the mind's disorders as Cavendish's analogic leanings are given full expression.

Then another said, that an Ague in the Minde was Doubt and Hope; the cold Fit being Doubt, and the hot Fit, Hope.

A second answered, that Agues were Fear, which caused sharking Fits.

A third said, that Jealousie was an Ague, that had cold and hot Fits.

Nay, said a fourth, Jealousie is an Hective Feaver, that is, an Extraordinary Heat got into the Arteries, which inflames the Spirit of Action, drinks up the Blood of

Tranquillity, and at last wasts and consumes the Body of Love (NP: 138).

So souls and bodies, although separable, were linked in ways which were not always to the soul's advantage. The mutability of the body affected the soul and made it also changeable.

In two areas Cavendish's ranking of soul over body breaks down, both of them—at least apparently—in the service of fame. Cavendish has no objections to the physical and social goods of life if they help her become famous: indeed she is almost required to use them in order to communicate herself to the masses to achieve her fame, although she still claims that she desires her fame to come from an apprehension of her wit and worthy qualities. As well, Cavendish contradicts the ranking of internal and external qualities when the matter in question is beauty, a subject which produces strong and mutually opposed discourses in her work.

### **Fertility and Mortality**

Underlying Cavendish's writing about minds and bodies are two propositions which shape a logic of fertility and mortality in the light of Cavendish's own desire to be more than transitorily mortal:

All that reproduces must die.

The Immortal has no issue of its own kind.

In "The Marriage of Life and Death" Cavendish sketches an allegoric myth to explain the mortality of the fruitful:

But when Life and Death met, Death took Life by the Hand,  
then Peace married them, and Rest made their Bed of  
Oblivion, wherein Life lay in the cold Arms of Death. Yet  
Death got numerous Issues; and ever since, whatsoever is



produced from Life, dyes. Where, before this Marriage, there was no such thing as dying, for Death and Life were single, Death being a Batchelor, and Life a Maid.... But he, as a loving and fond Husband, follows her; and when he embraces her, she grows big, and soon produces young Lives. But all the Off-spring of Death and Life are divided, half dwelling with Life, and half with Death (NP: 136-7).

The corollary—that the immortal is infertile—appears in “The propagating Souls” where the souls of two lovers leave their earthly mansions, decide to avoid the company in Elyzium, and venture off to the stars together. By mingling their souls they produce offspring

called Meteors, which are shining Lights like Stars: but being produced from the mortal temper of the Souls, are subject to Mortality ... for whatsoever is Mortal, may beget their like, or kinde, which other things that are Immortal never do.

But when these two Souls had travelled above the Planets, they became one fix'd Star, as being eternal, and not subject to dye.

But when they were thus, they produced no more Issues; for what Mortality the Body left (NP: 133-4).

Cavendish herself was physically barren and mentally fertile, and desired immortality through fame. The immortal does not produce issue of the same kind as itself: Cavendish did not produce children, but her books were her issue. Denied and denying the conventional fertility of the body which would have emphasised her own mortality, Cavendish turned to the fertility of the mind which furthered her claim to immortality.

Knowing that her body would cease to be, and unsure about the fate of her soul, Cavendish decided that the way to ensure the continuity of her name was to make it known to the minds of

others. Writing was a special way of doing this, since the written word, and especially the autobiographic written word, shows the writer in a particularly intellectual way, appealing not—as graphic, plastic or musical arts do—to the senses, but directly to the mind. As a writer Cavendish was a thinking being and not a breeding beast. Literacy was also amongst the accomplishments which Cavendish had managed to acquire (although roughly) in her deficient education, so it was a field in which it was possible for her to create. It was quiet, private, and did not require much space or unusual or expensive tools. And most importantly the written word could be published with her name on the title page.

It is strange then that, as noted in the preface to this thesis, Cavendish is so difficult to name. Her works, the ones which would ensure the continuity of her name, commemorate “the thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle,” the titled and virtuous self into which Margaret Lucas had transformed herself. They also commemorate the bashful young woman who was unhappy at Court and the writer defiant in defence of her virtue. Yet it is fitting that the eulogy written on her death by Shadwell, one of the poets patronised by William Cavendish, includes the couplet, “She was not as most of her frail sex are / Who are fruitful Wombs but Barren Brains” (quoted in Jones: 174). Cavendish didn’t want to die like a woman, but to live in immortal fame like her heroes Caesar, Alexander, and Shakespeare. In her effort to emulate these male models she was constrained by the fact that as a woman she was subject to the restricting code of feminine virtue.

## Femininity and the Bonds of Virtue

---

Stuart women and men perceived and constructed themselves differently. Men were meant to be valiant, while women's prime concern was supposed to be their virtue. Cavendish's project of public self-construction through writing was complicated by the demands—external and internalised—of femininity and virtue, since she was concerned that her virtue and wit be publicised rather than questioned. For a woman it was a paradox to desire and work for both fame and virtue, and consequently gender is a constant issue in her works. In pursuing fame while attempting to retain the appearance of virtue Cavendish feminised her art, used feminine drama as performance art, and utilised the defence of virtue as a legitimisation for a woman's actions.

Legal, intellectual, and social codes reinforced each other to deny Stuart women the access to the public sphere which was given to men. Women were not citizens: they could not vote or hold public office, and were barred from most of the careers which brought direct power and public fame to men. Particularly restrictive was the legal concept of coverture, under which a married woman was not recognised as an independent person in the eyes of the law:

In this consolidation which we call wedlock is a locking together. It is true, that man and wife are one person; but understand in what manner. When a small brooke or little river incorporateth with Rhodanus, Humber, or Thames, the poor rivulet looseth her name; it is carried and recarried with the associate; it beareth no sway; it possesseth nothing

during coverture. A woman as soon as she is married, is called *covert*; in Latine *nupta*, that is 'veiled'; as it were, clouded and overshadowed; she hath lost her streame. I may more truly, farre away, say to a married woman, Her new self is her superior; her companion, her master.... All of them [women] are understood either married, or to be married, and their desires are to their husbands, I know no remedy, yet some can shift it well enough. The common laws here shaketh hand with divinitye.<sup>20</sup>

As constricting as the legal code was the social code which determined the good woman, whose career was defined by her sex and her relations to men by blood and marriage. Such women—the chaste maids, dutiful wives and queen consorts—were industrious and virtuous, maintaining conventional gender roles which were essential to the smooth functioning of Stuart society. Shaped in the same mould of domestic femininity, good women weren't noticeably differentiated as individuals, but were memorable only as better or worse examples of a given type. Almost by definition such women did not draw the public gaze to themselves.

Cavendish, by contrast, wanted fame for the constructed image of herself which she revealed to her readers and which she sometimes acted out in public performances. The written word was a medium produced in private and published for the public, allowing the woman writer who had the time and space (and Cavendish was one of few with these advantages in her day) to create in peace, present finished works, and maintain a distinction between the self who wrote and the self which was written. Yet publication of work

---

<sup>20</sup> From *The Lawes Resolutions of Women's Rights*, (London, 1632) quoted in Thompson: 162.

in which a woman wielded the pen aroused hostile responses and was a venture requiring that apologies and explanations be made, or defences put in place, so it comes as no great surprise that the first two pieces in *Natures Pictures* are letters by William, Cavendish's husband, advertising and defending her work. The second of these epistles begins a defence of Cavendish's presence in the male domain of letters by describing the nature of her transgression:

O but a Woman writes them, she doth strive  
T'intrench too much on Man's Prerogative;  
Then that's the crime her learned Fame pulls down (NP:  
A7).

Cavendish, who aspired to the best in all things, drew much criticism when she sought to improve herself by aspiring to the pursuits peculiar to the 'better' sex.

### **Strategies and Written Responses**

In response to the dilemma of fame and virtue Cavendish made her famous works proclamations of virtue—in general and as exemplified by her own particular life—since the active defence of virtue was one of the few ways in which women could legitimately assert themselves. *Natures Pictures* sets out "to present Virtue ... to defend Innocency ... [and] to shew that Vice is seldome crown'd with good Fortune" (NP: A11). She hopes that "this work of mine will rather quench Amorous passions, than inflame them, and beget chast Thoughts, nourish love of Vertue, kindle humane Pitty, warme Charity, increase Civillity, strengthen fainting patience, encourage noble Industry, crown, Merit, instruct Life; and recreate Time, Also I hope it will damn vices, kill follies, prevent Errors,

forwarne youth, and arme the life against misfortunes" (NP: A16-7).

By writing in this way Cavendish was taking a stance against the extreme feminine compliance which was expected of women and which could also be the cause of their downfall. The Restoration politician Halifax described this aspect of what was actually a double-bind for women in his *Advice to a Daughter*:

You must first lay it down for a foundation in general, that there is inequality in the sexes, and that for the better economy of the world the men, who were to be the lawgivers, had the larger share of reason bestowed upon them; by which means your sex is the better prepared for the compliance that is necessary for the better performance of those duties which seem to be most properly assigned to it.<sup>21</sup>

Self-knowledge and self-assertion were valued qualities in men, who were supposed to know their wills in order to direct the world, while the inferior intellect and hazier self-construction expected of women prepared them for a life of compliance. Yet while it was good to be compliant to the will of men, being too compliant—especially to men's sexual advances—could compromise a woman's virtue and was patently not good. The problem was that a woman's virtue was often identified with her chastity: it was something she had in its fullest form through no endeavour of her own and could only lose. To be a good woman was to steer the difficult path between the Scylla of passive undefended amiability

---

21 (Halifax: 277.) This passage was taken from the *Advice to a Daughter* which the Royalist minister Halifax wrote 32 years after the publication of *Natures Pictures*. Although Halifax was writing out of a Restoration social climate, and may in part be reacting against what Cavendish stood for, his words convey strands of belief which were common throughout the century.

and the Charybdis of active sexual assertion, either of which could be as socially damning as the other. In general, virtue was more likely to be tarnished by anything a woman did outside the restrictive bounds of femininity than burnished by her actions, but it was just possible to augment virtue by the negative procedures of resisting overwhelming temptation or making ultimate sacrifices to retain it. Cavendish utilises this legitimate defense of virtue as a rationalisation for action in both the fact and content of her writing.

In defining her purpose in writing *Natures Pictures* as "to present Virtue, the Muses leading her, and the Graces attending her. Likewise, to defend Innocency, to help the distressed, and lament the unfortunate" (NP: A11, To The Reader) Cavendish has latched on to the defense and promotion of virtue—admirable designs in which a woman may assert herself with the greatest permissible degree of forceful action—to validate her writing and minimise her misconduct. The defense of innocence, however, is also a chivalric ideal, assuming the power and agency to act to protect an other which was the privilege of the masculine role. Cavendish's statement of intent is ambiguously self- and other-oriented: she is both the fair and virtuous maid—the paragon of feminine virtue and vulnerability—and the chivalric knight who bravely defends the fair qualities which cannot defend themselves. On one level she herself personifies Virtue, present in her autobiography and attended by the gracious musings which make up the rest of the text, but she is also the heroic defender of the woman writer Cavendish, acting to save her other self. For feminine passivity and compliance could provide men with opportunities to display their prowess by saving the defenceless woman, but one of

Cavendish's more subversive themes is that men can seldom be relied upon. Either they are not present when needed, or they are themselves the threat rather than the defence. In such circumstances a woman must learn to be her own knight, and her appropriation of supposedly masculine characteristics is justifiable rather than transgressive.

So, ironically, the freedom of action of women in Cavendish's texts is often a consequence of the threats which assail them. As some women in the civil war led the defense of towns and castles in the absence of men to do this, so the women of Cavendish's writing were often brought to agency by the need to look to their own defense. Legitimated action required threat, and Cavendish seems to seek out this threat for her characters—and perhaps even for herself—in order to justify their actions while maintaining that they are still good and virtuous women.

### **Feminine drama -- femininity as performance art.**

Femininity was not all drudgery, however, and while she was unhappy with the display of feminine duties, Cavendish was not at all averse to the display of feminine drama, being quick to detail her interest in the costumes and the benefits of courtesy which so attracted her. It is my belief that her childhood delight in dressing up may have been Cavendish's introduction to the notion of creating oneself, contributing to an understanding of femininity as performance art:

I took great delight in attiring, fine dressing and fashions, especially such fashions as I did invent myself, not taking that pleasure in such fashions as was invented by others: also I did dislike any should follow



my Fashions, for I always took delight in a singularity, even in acoutrements of habits, but whatsoever I was addicted to, either in fashions of Cloths, contemplation of Thoughts, actions of Life, they were Lawfull, Honest, Honorable and Modest, of which I can avouch to the world with a great confidence, because it is a pure Truth (NP "A true Relation": 387-8).

Cavendish undercuts the conventional nature of her interest in the feminine concerns of clothing and fashion by turning it into an art of individualistic self-expression. The outlandish garb for which she became well known in later life began as a legitimate feminine outlet for self-expression in which she herself was both the creator and the product, paralleling her later self-construction in writing. Her interest is in fashion, but particularly in the fashions she devises for herself which remain peculiar to her as markers of her creativity and difference. Cavendish's "delight in a singularity" is a joy in her own uniqueness. Whether in gowns or folios, Cavendish claimed originality and desired full responsibility for the appearance she created for herself.

Again, though, after stating the early origin of her desire to be special and her use of creativity to achieve this distinction, Cavendish shies away from her direct statements of delight and ambition and retreats to defend her virtue from the attacks she expects such declarations to provoke, rushing to remind the reader that everything she does is still "Lawfull, Honest, Honorable and Modest." Having ventured too far into individuation, Cavendish swings back to state that she is still a good woman, and that this is only partly in spite of her ambitions, for the things she has been motivated to do have always been fittingly virtuous. She does not

address the transgression of being ambitious, but defends instead the actions which have been the result and focus of her ambition.

Her imagery shows Cavendish's co-option of the traditional crafts of women as scenes for overt artistic display, while also demonstrating her internalisation of the ideology of femininity which restricted women to creation in these areas. For the clothes—the outward show about which Cavendish is so ambivalent—are profoundly important to her. When denying any attachment to the material things of life, the ultimate sacrifice is to relinquish her fine clothing, which she details in a way which shows her continued fascination with even the simplest garb:

though I desire to appear at the best advantage whilst I live in the view of the publick World, yet I could most willingly exclude my self, so as Never to see the face of any creature, but my Lord, as long as I live, inclosing myself like an Anchoret, wearing a Frize-gown, tied with a cord about my waste (NP: 390).

Having garbed herself in fine words and fabrics, she can relinquish neither without dismantling the image she created. Instead of giving up her self-defining constructions, Cavendish makes a point of sacrificing the vanity which could be seen to attach to them, wearing instead the robes which mark her as a virtuous martyr. Clothes make the woman.

Clothing also provides a metaphor for Cavendish's writing in terms of the fashions of the day, with all the moral overtones associated with different styles of dress:

Likewise, I have not endeavoured so much for the eloquence, and elegancy of speech, as the naturall and most usuall way of speaking, in severall Discourses, and ordinary

Phrases; but perchance my Readers will say, or at least think I have dressed the several subjects of my Discourses too vulgar, or that the Garments, which is the language, is thread-bare: 'tis true, they are not drest up in constraint fashions, which are set phrases, not tied up with hard words, nor bumbast sentences, but though they are carelessly, yet they are not loosely drest (NP: To My Readers).

Since loose dressing was associated with loose morals, Cavendish is pre-emptively denying the charge that her works, and consequently her self, are in any way immoral; while denying also that they are tricked out to deceive. Her writings, she claims, are fittingly and naturally attired. Indeed:

I am a Speaker of Truth, that is, I never say any thing for a Truth, that is False, and I am so great a lover of Truth, as I am one of her order, and have taken the habit of sincerity, in which I will live and dye (NP: A23).

The robes Cavendish and her heroines wear in *Natures Pictures* are usually symbolic and always dramatic: the young Delitia wears black to her first Ball because "I mourn like a young Widow, for I have lost my Husband" (NP: 190), and Cavendish herself writes of her year and a half in England away from her husband that:

seldom did I dress my self, as taking no delight to adorn my self, since he I onely desired to please was absent, although report did dress me in a hundred severall fashions: 'tis true when I did dress my self, I did endeavour to do it to my best becoming, both in respect to my self, and those I went to visit, or chanc't to meet (NP: 382).

So Cavendish didn't really dress up in London, except when anyone might see her. In her justifications of fine clothes she often mentions a moral obligation to display oneself in a manner fitting to one's station which has its origins in childhood: "As for our

garments, my Mother did not only delight to see us neat and cleanly, fine and gay, but rich and costly; maintaining us to the heighth of her Estate, but not beyond it" (NP: 369). This idea links with the notions of socially-binding ceremony which both Cavendishes advanced: the king should use such ceremony, not for its own sake but to impress upon the people the full pomp and grandeur of sovereignty. Likewise down the social order: Cavendish herself will take her place in the display because "I am so proud, or rather just to my Lord, as to abate nothing of the quality of his Wife, for if Honour be the marke of Merit, and his Masters Royall favour ... it were a baseness for me to neglect the Ceremony thereof" (NP: 390). Dressing well is not so much a pleasure, claims Cavendish, as an obligation to her husband's rank. So, in many ways, did Cavendish make virtues of her actions.

## An Excursion into the Text:

### Reading and Commentary

---

In a passage from her autobiographical "true Relation" Cavendish records her desire to be the best in all things, describing her grandiose project in knotty, litotic prose which reveals her struggle to reconcile the demands of fame and modesty. The passage shows the effects on Cavendish's writing of her desires to publish and veil herself:

and truly I am so vain, as to be so self-conceited, or so naturally partiall, to think my friends, have as much reason to love me as another, since none can love more sincerely than I, and it were an injustice to prefer a fainter affection, or to esteem the Body more than the Minde, likewise I am neither spitefull, envious, nor malicious, I repine not at the gifts that nature, or Fortune bestows on others, yet I am a great Emulator; for though I wish none worse than they are, yet it is lawfull for me to wish my self the best, and to do my honest endeavour thereunto, for I think it no crime to wish myself the exactest of Natures works, my thred of life the longest, my Chain of Destinie the strongest, my minde the peaceablest; my life the pleasantest, my death the easiest, and the greatest Saint in Heaven; also to do my endeavour, so far as honour and honesty doth allow of, to be the highest on Fortunes Wheele, and to hold the wheele from turning, if I can, and if it be commendable with anothers good, it were a sin not to wish my own; for as Envie is a vice, so Emulation is a Vertue, but Emulation is in the way to Ambition, or indeed it is a Noble Ambition, but I fear my Ambition inclines to vain glory, for I am very ambitious, yet 'tis neither for Beauty, Wit Titles, Wealth or Power, but as they are steps to raise me to

Fames Tower, which is to live by remembrance in after-ages  
(NP: 388-9).

This passage is remarkable for its many twists as Cavendish tries to advance herself while at the same time defending her virtue from the charges which accompany those advances. Her initial admission of vanity dissolves into the statement that she believes her friends “have as much reason to love me as another”. Cavendish aspires to be the best, yet—barred from the public employments in which men may show their excellent qualities—she is channelled into writing, virtue, and love, and makes her famous career of these. “[N]one can love more sincerely than I” is a claim to excellence which defines her as a subject while ostensibly emphasising her ability to focus on an other. The claim is modulated by the expectation that others will also aspire to the best—in this case her level of sincere love—introducing in an other-oriented way a concept which Cavendish later takes up for herself. To aspire to the best is only right and proper, even though it may seem immodest.

That it is “an injustice ... to esteem the Body more than the Minde” introduces Cavendish’s division of body and mind, amorous and noble loves, and her higher valuation of noble love. The ‘best’ she aspires to is the non-physical, unchanging, and ‘pure.’

Cavendish then declares that although she is free of the bad qualities associated with envy, “yet I am a great Emulator.” This is not to say she is a copyist—which would directly contradict claims of originality—since the Douay Bible, published in 1609, used the term “emulator” to describe God as “A ‘jealous’ being, one who brooks no competitor” (*OED*). There is tension between the

clauses: although she isn't nasty about other people's talents and good fortune, and wouldn't put others down so she could look better, Cavendish wants to stand alone as the best. This ambivalence about rivals also colours her approach to other women who might threaten her uniqueness. With words such as "lawfull", "honest endeavour" and "no crime" Cavendish asserts the legitimacy of her project: her defensiveness shows not only in her need to assert that she is justified, but in the statement that her ambition will fulfil itself through the acceptable route of good hard work, and the retreat from the positive "lawfull" to the litotic "no crime" within the space of three lines.

What follows is a litany of qualities and experiences which Cavendish desires for herself. Beginning with the exact and the strong, Cavendish moves to the peaceful, pleasant and easy, shifting from the more masculine qualities to those conventionally and acceptably feminine. Even in the midst of her grand agenda, Cavendish is restrained by the knowledge that her aspirations carry with them the suggestion that she may behave improperly in their pursuit. She will endeavour—again a reminder that "there is a Destiny belongs to Industry" (NP: 121)—"to be the highest on Fortunes Wheele," but only "so far as honour and honesty doth allow of," and only "if I can."

As a woman, Cavendish was expected to put the needs of others before her own needs. Her relation to others is again mentioned, along with a reference to the relative virtues of wishing one's own good and the good of others, when Cavendish writes that it would be a sin not to wish her own good so long as it doesn't interfere with another's. From discussion of law and crime, Cavendish has

moved to the sin she would commit by denying her own good, which is both a radical statement of the importance she attributes to her project, and a declaration that even if her work was perhaps reprehensible in the eyes of society and law, she had a higher moral obligation to continue with it.

In addition to arguing for the inversion of common ideas, Cavendish often applied to personal qualities a technique of purification through scapegoating. Taking two terms for the one characteristic—in this passage *Envie* and *Emulation*—Cavendish attributed to one of them the negative features in a way which purified the other. Thus “as *Envie* is a vice, so *Emulation* is a Vertue,” and emulation leads to ambition, or is perhaps a kind of ambition, which sanctifies ambition. But then the values turn again, for “I fear my Ambition inclines to vain glory.” Since vainglory is most certainly not a virtue, but a conceited and vaulting ambition, Cavendish returns to the vanity with which this excerpt began.

But Cavendish qualifies even the seemingly definite statement that “I am very ambitious.” Her ambition is not, she claims, for “Beauty, Wit, Titles, Wealth or Power, *but* as they are steps to raise me to Fames Tower” [emphasis mine]. Cavendish claims her desire for these things is as a means to the end of achieving fame rather than for their own sake. To garner fame one must be memorable for something: all these will contribute to one’s memorability. Just as she claims to wear spectacular clothes because they are a fitting display of rank and the ceremony of state, so she lays claim to all those aspects of outer display, not for their own sake, but because they contribute to a greater project.



## The Spider and the Phoenix:

### Originality

---

There are few pictures of Margaret Cavendish: one which has aroused comment is a frontispiece etching of her seated at a desk about to write. Although the room in which she sits is presumably a study or library, there are no books. The accompanying poem, probably by William Cavendish, explains why this should be: the bookless library is emblematic of Cavendish's originality.

Studious she is, and all alone,  
 Most visitants when she has none;  
 Her library on which she looks,  
 It is her head; her thoughts her books:  
 Scorning dead ashes without fire,  
 For her own flames do her inspire (quoted in Grant: 143).

Cavendish the phoenix did not need other people's books, for she claimed to find in herself a source of knowledge untainted by others. The idea that she was truly original contributed to her uniqueness and her claim to fame, but was also a response to her lack of education and the unfeminine nature of going out there and getting one's hands dirty. Cavendish was well able to take stock of her situation and make virtues of the necessities of her life.

Some of those necessities were the constraints which attached to women of Cavendish's time and place. When Cavendish wrote, scholarship was divided between the continued refinement of classical ideas—a medieval approach—and the renaissance experimentalism advocated by Bacon. In order to engage in these

pursuits with the intelligentsia of the day one needed to know the basic concepts and methods which grounded them. Cavendish didn't: she wrote often that she was uneducated; apologised frequently for her inadequacies; seemed at times envious of the education of those who were accepted in the 'right' academic circles; seemed to seek recognition in those circles by sending copies of her work to university libraries and requesting a visit to the Royal Society; disdained the limited, book-absorbed world of the scholar while contriving to live in a limited, writing-absorbed world herself; and could not understand why her ideas were not embraced by others. Douglas Grant summarizes "the principal difficulties which hindered her":

The first was simply her lack of education. She was intelligent enough to speculate on a natural mystery but as she wanted the training to bring her speculations to the test, she never advanced further than fancy.... As she was unable to check her conjectures by experiment, she could never proceed to firmer conclusions. But again, had she been fully aware of the importance of experiment, she would have had great difficulty putting her belief into practice. Opinion was set against women dabbling in such matters, and however splendidly she rose in her writings above convention, she could not mount higher (Grant: 195-6).

While Grant aptly notes the problems, it is my contention that they are among the foundations of Cavendish's commitments to originality and natural reason. Unable to derive her work from the accepted sources, she made a virtue of drawing inspiration from her own contemplations, a feature mentioned in an early story in which a woman wanders alone:

Because, said she, my Thoughts are then my own;  
For in a company my Thoughts do throng,

And follow every foolish babbling Tongue (NP: 6-7).

The reasons for Cavendish's lack of knowledge of literary and philosophical predecessors are varied. As a girl-child in post-Tudor England such knowledge was not deemed necessary to her education, but the other factors she mentions in *Natures Pictures* are unusual:

I have not read much History to inform me of the past Ages, indeed I dare not examin the former times, for fear I should meet with such of my Sex, that have out-done all the glory I can aime at, or hope to attaine (NP, An Epistle: A13);

my serious study could not be much, by reason I took a great delight in attiring, fine dressing and fashions, especially such fashions as I did invent my self, not taking that pleasure in such fashions as was invented by others: also I did dislike any should follow my Fashions, for I always took delight in a singularity, even in acoutrement of habits (NP: 387).

Both of these statements are gendered, and both set Cavendish apart from other women. In her project to be Margaret the First, Cavendish perceived other women as competition as well as companions, and she was unhappy about sharing her spotlight with anyone. "Nice" women who wrote after Cavendish ameliorated their (and possibly her) transgression by creating a myth of origin beginning with Sappho and invoking acceptable writers like Katherine Philips as predecessors and literary "grandmothers." Cavendish didn't do this: that she worked independently and without precursors was part of her own myth and philosophy of originality, which takes to itself all the responsibility and therefore all the fame and the shame of her creations. In her desire to be first, last, and only, she sought to

imitate none and be imitated by none; her immortality would breed no issue, but would be the object of admiration and worship. In her claim to her own uniqueness Cavendish appears to support the idea presented by Halifax when he describes the bait laid for the woman who might think herself exceptional. Although upon marriage women promised to obey their husbands

it appeareth reasonable that there might be an exception for extraordinary women from ordinary rules, to take away the just exception that lieth against the false measure of general equality.... in such instances where Nature is so kind as to raise them above the level of their own sex they might have relief, and obtain a mitigation in their own particular of a sentence which was given generally against womankind (Halifax 278).

Although Halifax quickly dismisses this idea, asserting that a few cases of injustice are no reason to undermine the absolute application of the law, the notion that an exceptional woman might not be subject to the unequal laws which governed her sisters was seductive, if not particularly practical. The would-be exceptional woman was encouraged to think of herself as elevated above women's normal estate, a mindset which focused on her specialness rather than asking disruptive questions about the nature of women's role, and separated her from camaraderie with other women. This explains something of the ambivalence of Cavendish's attitude to other women. Although it is bad to put others down in order to show oneself to the best advantage by contrast (NP: 388-9), it is the case that she is placed the higher because the majority of women are so low. Even though she herself hopes to be exalted in the histories, since

'Tis said, Historie instructs the Life, it registers Time, it inthrones Virtue, it proclaims Noble Natures, it crowns Heroick Actions, it divulges Baseness, and hangs up Wickedness; it is a Torch, that gives light to dark Ignorance; it is a Monument to the Dead, and a Fame to the Meritorious (NP: 178),

her own achievement and individuality are threatened by any other woman's achievements, so that paradoxically she claims, as above, that she dares not read history for fear of finding other women who would threaten the uniqueness of her project.

The alternation of attitudes which Cavendish evinces makes her problematic for feminists today, since although at times she writes for well-born women in general (class was always an issue for her), at other times her self-construction seems to depend on the relative and general inferiority of other women. For, she said, "I am so vain, if it be a vanity, as to endeavour to be worshipt, rather than not to be regarded" (NP: 390).

So what was the source of Cavendish's inspiration? She appears to have been a creative essentialist. Unlike the bee which represented the scholars in Swift's dialogue of the scholars, Cavendish did not gather and refine either classical writings or methodical observations of the world. As spider or silk-worm she claimed to take the substance of her works from herself, drawing on the imaginative ability rather than the mimetic or analytic. Turning inward, she found her conceptions active: creativity was something that welled up inside her, building much from little stimulus. Her conceptions of the mind are all the more distinctive of her because they are largely parthenogenetic.

Wit is like a goddess in Nature; for though it cannot dissolve, yet it can produce, not only something out of something, but something out of nothing; and Wit needs no other Table or Ground to draw its Draughts, or take Copy from, but its own Brain, which creates and invents, similizes and distinguisheth (NP: 181).

In her "true Relation" Cavendish tells that she so enjoys the company of her thoughts and fancies that:

my only trouble is, lest my brain should grow barren, or that the root of my fancies should become insipid, withering into a dull stupidity for want of maturing subjects to write on... although for my part I had rather sit at home and write, or walk, as I said, in my chamber and contemplate; but I hold necessary sometimes to appear abroad, besides I do find, that severall objects do bring new materials for my thoughts and fancies to build upon, yet I must say this in the behalf of my thoughts, that I never found them idle; for if the senses brings no work in, they will work of themselves, like silk worms that spinns out of their own bowels (NP: 385-386).

This changed the authoritative source of knowledge and inspiration from classical predecessors or the external world to the individual, privileging the 'self' as source of knowledge. The reality of the situation is that such armchair philosophy fostered Cavendish's analogic capacities: with few patterns she was forced to draw similarities and differences between what she knew rather than seeking outside herself for explanations. This approach permitted Cavendish to rework the same ideas into multifarious forms, giving her a certain independence of the real world since her work was seldom hindered by difficulties of data-collection. It was, in short, like her husband's disparagement of revision, both a prime reason for Cavendish's ability to write so many books, and a

major factor in the ridicule in which she has been held. Turning inward to spin fancy is both a strength, since it makes her independent and original, and a weakness if taken to baroque, obsessed extremes.

And spinning fancy is what Cavendish claims to do: further to her description that her creative process is "like silk worms that spinns out of their own bowels" are two other passages using the spinning of silk as metaphor for artistic creativity.

The Silk-worm and the Spider houses make,  
All their Materials from their Bowels take;  
They cut no Timber down, nor carve they stone,  
Nor buy they Ground to build their Houses on:  
Yet they are Curious, made with Art and Care,  
Like Lovers, who build Castles in the Air,  
Which every puff of Winde is apt to break,  
As Imaginations, when Reason's weak (NP: 84).

The work of spinning provides a feminine and industrious image, but the insectoid comparison is also monstrous and unsettling. The substance of the work, which is in this case also one's shelter and residence (or perhaps one's snare) is taken from the creator in a very physical way reminiscent of birth or excretion. In the commerce of creation Cavendish's works are her coin and her children. The immortality of such imaginings is not, however, a matter of certainty; the "Castles in the Air" describe the fragility of the endeavour thus achieved, emphasising Cavendish's beliefs that fancy must be supported by rationality in order to be lasting, and that mere fancy was nothing unless it was published. Published fancy was not merely a shelter in life, but also a memorial and heir after death which paradoxically drains the life-force in its creation:

The Silk-worm digs her Grave as she doth spin,  
 And makes her Winding-sheet to lap her in;  
 And from her Bowels takes a heap of Silk,  
 Which on her Body as a Tomb is built;  
 Out of her Ashes doth her young ones rise,  
 Bequeaths her Life to them, and so she dyes.  
 They only take that Life to spin a Death,  
 For as they winde up Silk, they winde out Breath.  
 Thus, rather than do nought, or idle be,  
 They'll work, and spin out Lifes small Thread we see.  
 When all their work is done, ready to dye,  
 Their Wings are grown, for Life away to fly (NP: 84-85).

This passage may show ambivalence about the present cost of immortal fame: the works are not only expressions of her creative impulses but also winding sheets for her own physical life. Knowing that life is short and art long, Cavendish apparently found it no great sacrifice to immerse herself in her writing.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to the vision of art as coin, this describes the cost to the artist of producing the work. It also introduces Cavendish's fixed idea that the full perfection of fame was only evident after a fittingly sacrificial death had crowned one's life.

In addition to its 'real' basis, dedication to originality was also strategic: Cavendish may not have been able to take part in scholarly debate, but she could claim very loudly that her writings were indeed her own and not copied from anyone else and that she deserved recognition for being one of the few natural poets around. It was a source of considerable frustration to her that her opponents

---

22 This ambivalence was by no means limited to Cavendish, but is part of the artistic dilemma which confronts those who see their works as products rather than processes and wonder whether to seek perfection of the the life or of the art.



persisted in accusing her of plagiarism whenever she wrote anything they considered good: such accusations elicited from Cavendish expressions of surprise, since she hadn't the education to have read the works she was supposed to have copied. Writing of Aristotle—who she claims had the easier job of describing the world rather than analysing it—Cavendish says: “Not that I do discommend *Aristotle*, for I only speak of him as I have heard of him and his Works, not as I do learnedly know either” (NP: 401).

Claims that she copied or did not write her works were a dire threat to Cavendish's plans to enshrine her name in history through them. These accusations galled her into writing a string of letters and defences, and eventually she gave this doubt as one of the reasons for writing and publishing her own life: a text which in presenting her as subject as well as author, bound together the two facets of her selfhood which were essential to the public display.

But if they will not believe my Books are my own, let them search out the Author or Authoress: but I am very confident that they will do like *Drake*, who went so far about, untill he came to the place he first set out at. But for the sake of after-Ages, which I hope will be more just to me than the present, I will write the true Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and to this part of my Life, not regarding carping Tongues, or malicious Censurers, for I despise them (NP: 367).

Ironically, however, Cavendish is at times keen to show what she does know of the classical writers: “Heavens Library, which is Fames Palace purged from Errors and Vices” is a story devoted to demonstrating Cavendish's opinions on everyone from Socrates to Copernicus as the gods decide whose books to retain in their library of fame. The same Aristotle who she later claims not to have read

is among the philosophers she retains (NP: 358). The reasons she gives to Jove for the judgements are sometimes enlightening: rightful defences of life and land are permitted to remain in the shelves of heroes while "those that make warre unjustly, vain gloriously or covetously" were cast therefrom (NP: 360). Even Cupid's pleading is not enough to save the works of Amadis de Gaule, first among romance writers whose words corrupt virtue. Cavendish had in her introductory letters already distanced herself from this same writer and declared her abhorrence of the romance genre:

As for those Tales I name Romancicall, I would not have my Readers think I write them, either to please, or to make foolish whining Lovers, for it is a humor of all humors, I have an aversion to.... Neither do I know the rule or method of Romancy Writing; for I never read a Romancy Book throughout in all my life, I mean such as I take to be Romances, wherein little is writ which ought to be practised, but rather shunned as foolish Amorosities, and desperate Follies (NP: A15).

Cavendish seeks rather to exalt "Loves discreet Vertues, and true Valour" (NP: A16). However, despite the vehemence of her disclaimer it seems to serve more to show Cavendish's desire not to be categorised as a writer of romance or, worse still, as a copyist, than to give an accurate description of the stories to follow.

Another way in which Cavendish declares her originality and her determination to continue in a 'natural' path is in her statement on language. Despite her years on the Continent, Cavendish was monolingual and took great pains to point out that if foreign-sounding words appeared in her writing it was because "English is a compounded Language, as mithridated of many ingredients" and

they were terms she had encountered in English usage rather than being borrowings from other tongues (NP: A23).

In all, Cavendish's claims to originality leave one with the sense that she had heard tell of many great thinkers and was keen to drop their names into her writings but had little first-hand experience of their works. Name-dropping was another way to show off and sound erudite, while denial of familiarity with the great works was a way to draw attention to her claims to have developed her ideas independently.

Cavendish the phoenix took inspiration from her own fire, and ended *Natures Pictures* with the hope that a future generation might find her child-egg-book and "raise | It from the Dust" that it "may in after Ages live" (NP: 390=\*404). The works are time-capsules holding the pattern of a new Cavendish, mental descendant and lasting imago of Cavendish the writer, who might rise, alone and immortal, in a more understanding time. The image Cavendish created was that she was unique, original, and in touch with the true source of ideas in ways which were barred to trained scholars.

## Selves and Others:

### Cavendish's Women

---

The tales in *Natures Pictures* deal most often with issues which affected the lives of women, and particularly with stories about the courses of love and ambition in women's lives. Cavendish's awareness of the difficulties women faced in trying to combine the pursuit of fame with marriage strongly colours her work, but in her usual fashion she finds a way to turn love into a famous career. She also presents a small range of 'superwomen' who appear to be images of Cavendish's fantasy selves and who manage, in their various ways, to extend the realms of women's action as far as Cavendish can comfortably imagine.

#### **Ambition and Love**

One obstacle in the way of a Stuart woman's achievement of personal fame was the expectation that she would marry and sacrifice any ambitions she might have in favour of establishing a home and family. The society in which Cavendish wrote had an even narrower range of options for women than had existed two centuries earlier, since with the dissolution of the monasteries in the reign of Henry VIII it was no longer possible for women to choose religious life with the quiet scholarship which that might entail. Marriage became almost the only way for a woman to leave the family of her birth, and there was little likelihood of any woman garnering the time, let alone a room of her own and sufficient income, to write. The world of Cavendish's stories

examines aspects of this problem for ambitious women, and offers two quite separate approaches to the problem. One could eschew marriage in favour of art and ambition while living on family money (a fine thing indeed if you had the family money to live on), or make a career of love.

The first strong strand of Cavendish's discussion of marriage is that it is to be avoided at all costs. Some of her discussions of the drawbacks of marriage are presented in wryly amusing terms, as in the story of "The Discreet Virgin":

There was a grave Matron who came to visit a young Virgin, whom she ask'd why she did not marry, since she was of marriageable years. Truly, said she, I am best pleased with a single life.

What! answered the Matron, will you lead Apes in Hell. The young Lady said, it was better to lead Apes in Hell, than live like Devils on Earth, for, said she, I have heard that a married Couple seldom or never agree, the Husband roars in his drink, and the Wife scolds in her Choler, the servants quarrell, the Children cry, and all is in more disorder, than tis thought Hell is, and a more confused noise.

Said the Matron, such are only the poor meaner sort of people, that live so, but the noble and rich men and their wives live other wise, for the better sort, as the noble and rich, when they are drunk are carried straight to bed, and laid to sleep, and their wives dance untill their husbands are sober.

Said the Lady, if they dance until their Husbands are sober, they will dance untill they are very weary; So they do, replied the Matron.

Why said the Lady, the Husbands are for the most part drunk. And the other answered, and the Ladies are for the most part dancing (NP: 109-110).

In addition to the “ordinary” problems Cavendish describes in marriage—her works are full of references to the drunkenness and infidelity of husbands—was the indisputable fact that marriage interfered with a woman’s plans for what we would now call a career. The problems of combining marriage with personal ambition are central to stories such as “Ambition preferr’d before Love,” in which the heroine acknowledges her love for her suitor, but declares that her ambition is a greater force. Since even the best pre-marital promises of artistic support are unlikely to be fulfilled after the ceremony, this woman decides not to marry:

the fame of your Worth, and praise of your Merits, hath planted a Root of Affection in my Infant Years, which hath grown up with my time: but, said she, there was another Root also planted therein by encouragement, which is Ambition, which Ambition, sayes she, hath out grown that; so that the Tree of Love is like an Oak to a Cedar, for though it may be more lasting, yet it will never be so high. On this high Tree of Ambition, said she, my Life is industrious to climbe to Fames high Tower, for the top reaches thereto; which if I marry, I shall never do (NP: 120).

The tree of love might produce offspring for posterity, but it did not mark the name and individual endeavour of the women in the line of descent. Personal ambition sought its fulfilment in creative works which would last and be remembered as the products of their maker. Wives were not free to pursue fame because “Husbands will never suffer them to climb, but keep them fast lock’d in their arms, or tye them to houshold imployments, or through a foolish obstinacy bar up their Liberty” (NP: 120).

It is not only malicious husbands who cause problems, though, for even with the best of intentions the trials of marriage will thwart

ambition: "but did they not only give them Liberty, but assist them all they could, yet the unavoydable troubles of Marriage would be like great storms, which would shake them off, or throw them down, before they had climed half the way " (NP:120).

The suitor in this tale assures the heroine, that he will not interfere with her ambitious designs, but reminds her that "Fortune, Fates and Destiny, have power in the ways to Fame, as much as in the ways to Death" (NP: 121). Her reply shows a desire to avoid anything that might distract from her goal:

Yes, said she, but there is a Destiny belongs to Industry, and Prudence is a good Decree in Nature; Wherefore, said she, I will be so prudent, as not to marry; and so industrious, that all the actions of my life, and studious contemplations, shall be busily imployed to my Ambitious Designs; for I will omit nothing towards the life of my Memory (NP: 121).

It is not stated how this young woman will support her designs, nor indeed what forms her ambition takes to express itself, but marriage is clearly contrary to her desire for fame.

Those of Cavendish's women who do marry before the end of the story usually provide examples which support Cavendish's dislike of the institution, showing in particular the lack of security for women even in relationships which had seemed happy for many years. In "The Matrimonial Agreement" the heroine strikes a bargain for separation, maintenance, and half her husband's estate if he is unfaithful to her. Although this provides her with options when she later discovers his infidelities, it is not for long a protection against them. As it happens, she chooses not to take up her contractual rights but instead plays his own game of sexual

liberty back at him, gaining equality of action and compromising her integrity in the process. Dale Spender describes this as “one of the most appealing stories of Margaret Cavendish (from my point of view)” (1986: 44) and writes with approval of the heroine’s actions:

She shows little compunction about claiming her share, but she does *not*—romantically—withdraw from the world or retire from society. Instead she uses her financial independence as maintenance, while she embarks on the same course as her husband and conducts her own affairs. To my mind a realistic if not a less moral or less conventional ending (Spender: 44).

But Spender, with her commendation of action and unconventional choice, has missed the point. The tone of the ending is sad: the heroine’s revenge, “to shew her Husband she could take delight, and have Lovers as well as he,” brings her a form of reactive agency and shows that she can “finde as much pleasure as her Husband, in Variety,” but it turns her from the forthright young woman who freely negotiated a pre-nuptial contract to a socialite creature of the court who learns to dissemble about her affairs because the pretence heightens her pleasure:

[she] now begins to flatter [her husband], and to dissemble with him, that she may play the Whore more privately, finding a delight in obscurity, thinking that most sweet which is stolne; so they play like Children at bo-peep in Adultery; and face it out with fair looks, and smooth it over with sweet words, and live with false hearts, and dye with large Consciences (NP: 124).

This form of equality is achieved at the cost of integrity. The heroine, motivated by “Jealousie and Rage”, reacts to hurt in a way



which enshrines the pain rather than affirming herself positively. Her "equality" gives her some of the less pleasant aspects of the masculine model and takes from her the integrity which is the prime redeeming feature of feminine virtue. For Cavendish was aware that not all the traits associated with masculinity were admirable, and that some might be as destructive to women as they were to men. This affected any claims Cavendish made for equality, since her discussion of it included fear of the damage that straight equality could do her heroine. By bringing together the best aspects of the virtuous and the valiant, Cavendish attempted to create protagonists who were complete agents in both the private and the public worlds. A tale like "The Matrimonial Agreement" shows the pitfalls when the protagonists don't achieve this balance but become reactive rather than proactive, and reveals more ambivalence about the project of gaining equality than Spender allows. In attempting to make Cavendish into a certain sort of feminist heroine, the real complexity of her work is distorted.

In this tale, as in others, Cavendish explores possibilities which lie beyond the conventional, opening up a space for her heroines to act. Yet the proper order of things is reasserted in the final sentence: "But these repenting when they dyed, made a fair end, &c." (NP: 124). Although Cavendish is inspired to write of her heroines' adventures, she returns them at the end of the tales to a limited range of fairly conventional lives. The intervening episode has shown the world in some way inverted: the ending restores order, with only an occasional hint of subversion. This pattern maybe seen in terms of charivari or carnivalesque, where the world is turned topsy-turvy within defined limits as a release of pressure,

and where the consciousness of the reversal emphasises the rightness of the world-the-right-way-up which is its point of departure and conclusion. It is more interesting, however, to view the escapades of Cavendish's women as a series of ventures into a playground of possibilities where—with the pretexts of fate and protection of virtue—they try out options which would not normally be theirs. Cavendish is producing a space where women can be warriors, and politicians, and tyrants: a testing ground for ideas. That the endings are conventional does not detract from the fact that the restrictions have been broken, and this is one way in which Cavendish can be seen as proto-feminist. She tries things out, opening a space for possibilities: some meet with her disapproval and have the ring of moral fables, but they are too naturalistic in detail and too vigorously conceived to be contained within the attempts at conventional closure.

A different and unconventional response to the infidelity of suitors, and one which Cavendish recommends, is to immerse oneself in study of the arts and sciences as a cure for love-sickness. In a tale entitled "Loves Cure" a jilted woman finds solace in a metaphorical journey in which:

The Charioteer that drives the Chariot, was Ambition; the Postilion was Curiosity; the Sciences sitting therein, and Doubts and Hopes running as Laquais by ... Rhetorick presented me with a Posie of sweet Eloquence; and the Mathematiques crown'd me with Truth. But they all in their turns encouraged me, telling me, they would carry me to Fames Palace, and there I should remain (NP: 131).

The encouragement this woman receives from her analogised pursuits dispels the melancholy which succeeded the civil war of

her turbulent emotions upon abandonment. She now travels alternately in the chariots of the Sciences and the Muses:

And thus I am travelling with very wise and pleasant Company, but as yet I have no sight of the Palace; but howsoever, my Minde is so pleased with the Journey, and so delighted with the Society, and so proud of the Favours and Gifts it receives from them every day, that it despises the Follyes, hates the Falshood of Mankinde, and scorns the proffers of Fortune, not regarding the Vanities of the World (NP: 132).

This inverts the values which brought so much pain. That which was lost is now seen as worthless while its replacement is valorised, and the world of the intellect compensates for disappointment in the world of love. Cavendish has directed this character from pursuit of love, to pursuit of fame, to satisfaction with the journey towards fame. The question a modern reader must ask, with little hope of answer, is whether this approach is real or strategic; and if it is a stratagem whether it is to downplay the love which has failed, or to create a legitimation for pursuit of fame.

Despite her apparent dislike of marriage, a coterie of Cavendish's women do enter the bonds of matrimony most happily. With one memorable exception these marriages are conclusions to stories and have the "happily ever after" flavour of fairy tale or comedy, as at the end of "The Tale of a Traveller" when the hero settles down with a virtuous young woman he has found, and:

married they were, and in a short time after he carried her to his House, there made her Mistris of his Estate; and whil'st he governed his outward Affairs, she governed the Family at home, where they lived plentifully, pleasantly, and peaceably, not extravagantly, vain-gloriously, and

luxuriously; they lived neatly and cleanly, they loved passionately, thrived moderately, and happy they lived, and piously died (NP: 286).

The exception to this trend, and most remarkable of these tales, is Cavendish's own story, recounted in her "true Relation" where she describes her courtship by William Cavendish thus:

though I did dread Marriage, and shunn'd Mens companies, as much as I could, yet I could not, nor had not the power to refuse him, by reason my Affections were fix'd on him, and he was the only person I ever was in love with (NP: 375).

After the rest of the stories in which love rarely yields fame unless coupled with self-destruction and women in happy marriages sink with barely a trace, Cavendish's "true Relation" presents love as the overwhelming factor which changed even her mind about marriage. Elsewhere, however, Cavendish describes her marriage as a special case, as far removed from the generality of marriages as she hoped to be from the generality of women. Cavendish goes on to describe her own marriage as an example of noble and honest Love, a union of minds and souls rather than the transitory fancy based on appearance which was Amorous Love:

he was the only person I ever was in love with: Neither was I ashamed to own it, for it was not Amorous Love, I never was infected therewith, it is a Disease, or a Passion, or both, I only know by relation, not by experience.... but my Love was honest and honourable, being placed upon Merit, which affection joy'd at the fame of his Worth, pleas'd with delight in his Wit, proud of the respects he used to me, and triumphing in the affections he profest for me, which affections he hath confirmed to me by a deed of time, seal'd by constancy, and assigned by an unalterable decree of his promise (NP: 375).

As well as showing the distinction Cavendish makes between the desires of the body and of the mind, this passage shows Cavendish's trick of taking a quality—in this case love—dividing it in two—amorous and noble—and defining one aspect as good while rejecting the other. It is one of Cavendish's tactics as she retreats and advances through a dance of transgression and vehement virtue.

This sort of love might by its constancy become the basis of a lasting fame, unlike the fading amorousness based on physical beauty:

Besides, dear Lady, Beauty will decay,  
 And with that Beauty, Love will flee away;  
 If you take time, this heat of Love will wast,  
 Because 'tis only on a Beauty plac'd:  
 But if your Love did from his Virtue spring,  
 You might have lov'd, though not so fond have been.  
 The love of Virtue is for to admire  
 The Soul, and not the Body to desire;  
 That's a gross Love, which only dull Beasts use,  
 But noble Man to love the soul will choose;  
 Because the Soul is like a Deity,  
 There pure Love will live eternally (NP: 86).

In true Cavendish style this passage occurs in a dialogue discussing whether the the Soul and Body are so intermingled that it is impossible to separate the two sorts of love, or whether it is desirable to exert some discipline on the unruly senses in order to avoid a civil war of the self. Although the love of virtue wins out soon after, there are two ideas which develop from this passage: that beauty and the senses are strong and subversive forces; and that career planning required that love have, or at least claim to have, a more secure basis than physical attraction.

It is noteworthy, then, that Cavendish's description of her own feeling for her husband is echoed in the letter written by the heroine to the hero in "A Description of Constancy." The heroine's description of her love deserves comment for its blend of public and private, love and fame, declaration and veiling. The hero's fame first attracted the heroine's admiration, and her love for him is also a vehicle of fame, both through her shameless declarations of it in life and her hope to find a place in the hero's memory after her death. The heroine claims she is content to worship from a distance, yet her declaration of her attachment is phrased to attract response:

But let me tell you, this pure Love of mine  
 Is built on virtue, not on base design;  
 It hath no dross, nor high ambitions 'spire,  
 The flame is made by emaculate fire,  
 Which to the Altar of your merits bring,  
 From whence the flame to Heaven high may spring.  
 Your glorious Fame within my Heart, though young,  
 Did plant a Slip of Honour, from which sprung  
 Pure Love, and Chast desires, for I do crave  
 Only within your Heart a place to have.  
 I do not plead, hoping to be your Wife,  
 Nor 'twixt you and your Mistress to breed strife;  
 Or wish I that her Love you should forsake,  
 Or unto me a Courtly Friendship make;  
 But only when I'm dead, you would enshrine  
 Within your Memory this Love of mine;  
 Which Love to all the World I may proclaim  
 Without a blush, or check, or spotted fame.  
 'Tis not your Person I do so admire,  
 Nor yet your Wealth, or Titles I desire;  
 But your Heroick Soul, and Generous Minde,  
 Your Affability, and Nature kinde;  
 Your honest Heart, where Justice still doth reign,

Your prudent Thoughts, and a well temper'd Brain;  
 Your helping Hand, and your industrious Life,  
 Not to make broyls, but to decide all strife;  
 And to advance all those are in distress,  
 To help the weak, and those are powerless;  
 For which my Heart and Life to Love is bound,  
 And every thought of you with Honour crown'd (NP: 12).

This passage shows again Cavendish's duality: the decision to declare herself is an act of agency and self-determination, her request is apparently clear, and yet the overall effect is ambiguous. Denying many possible motives for her action, she draws attention to them. Publishing her sentiments, she pleads modesty. To crown her life, she seeks to be remembered after death, for love is this woman's claim to fame. Barred, like Cavendish, from 'publick' employments, she turns to pen and paper to make her private publication. The matter of her work is a cliché of women's sphere: her declaration of love. Yet she has chosen to make her love a famous work, creating from the conventions of feminine existence something which transcends the transience of feminine endeavour. This love is a career, both in the loving and in the creation of the artifacts of that love.

### **Superwomen**

There exists in Cavendish's writing a class of female protagonist who is extraordinarily gifted—usually with beauty, brains, and bravery—and manages to retain grace and virtue while acting in the public world. These characters do indeed seem to be projections of Cavendish's fantasy selves, and Grant is among those to comment that her autobiography

serves in effect, though not in intention, to show that all her tales were essentially autobiographical. They were the daydreams prompted by her own experience and are variations, more or less fantastic, upon it. Each story has its heroine and each heroine is Margaret in disguise; in the disguise of the learned lady or the lovely innocent (Grant: 154).

For the Duchess of Newcastle was her own favorite character, and she stalked through her plays and narratives in numerous transparent disguises (Gagen: 533).

Some of these heroines are intellectual and moral paragons whose obvious and inherent superiority attracts followers while the mighty ask their advice; others lead armies into battle, saving the day and showing their heroick spirits. Since the term 'heroine' was not in common use when Cavendish wrote, she coined the word 'heroickess' to describe the valiant women in her stories. *Natures Pictures* includes its share of such women, as well as containing a similar number of shorter stories of women who act as contrasts and examples of the mistakes people make. The following life-story of the heroickess is a composite of the good and famous superwomen—especially Delitia from "The Contract", Affectionata-Travelia from "Assaulted and pursued Chastity", and the she-Anchoret—but the others are drawn in for comment when they shed light on some aspect of Cavendish's writing.

The heroine's story often begins before her birth, with the description of her parents' happy marriage and nobility of spirit. Her mother usually dies in childbed, leaving a grieving widower who may soon follow her to the grave, and an only daughter. Thus the young heroickess-to-be becomes an orphaned heiress: an individual who stands alone, rather than being one of many. This



circumstance shapes her and may act as a plot device to free her from the domestic sphere. Lacking the protection of a family, she lacks also the constraints a family would impose, and even when she or her guardian desires to maintain some sort of propriety, she is thrown into situations which would be unlikely for a well-bred daughter.

Yet the heroickess is not totally without defenders. Before he died, her father took pains to protect her and her estate by placing her at court to be bred, appointing his brother her guardian, directing her to a contemplative life, or arranging for the child to be betrothed to someone of suitable status and fortune. If father has failed to make the required arrangements, the heroickess is no laggard in finding an aged protector for herself, although she is more likely to do this when she is disguised as a boy so there can be no confusion about the protector's motives. The uncle or adopted father-figure who loves his charge dearly and does what he thinks is best for her is a stock character in Cavendish's writings, and often provides the only contact which tempers the isolation of the heroine's upbringing. This may be a fictionalised echo of Cavendish's own experience and fantasy, since her father died when she was an infant, and her husband—who fostered her work and intellectual growth—was three decades her senior. It is also a reminder that there are relatively few secondary women's roles in Cavendish's writing. Cavendish's superwomen never have to deal with their mothers; indeed her work rarely depicts older women unless they are queens.

The life of the Cavendish heroickess usually includes a comprehensive education, which may be chosen for herself or

arranged by her father-figure. This education is sometimes a substitute for the loss of love, as in "Love's Cure", where it is an effective panacea for heart-ache. When the heroine of "The Contract" is denied her betrothed Duke, her Uncle says "since I am cross'd in thy Marriage, I will strive to make thee a Meteor of the Time", and attends to her education and intellectual development as a result (NP: 186). Even the she-Anchoret focuses on her life of wisdom and piety only when her beloved father has directed her to it from his deathbed. It is unclear from the mixed data of the text whether the turn towards the intellect is a reaction to the denial of love, or whether the tales of lost love are Cavendish's propaganda to deflect objections to women having intellectual interests. Either way, one thing is clear: men and love are fickle, and women's dependence on them is dangerous. Intellectual endeavour is emotionally a safer option, making a woman independent and giving her a guiding impulse which is securely her own.

The heroickess is gifted with beauty, grace, wit, and natural dignity. These inflame admiration and passion in the men who see her, and not a little jealousy in the women. She becomes a target for sexually predatory men who may, if her sizeable fortune is known, determine to marry her. Among these suitors is a well-bred man who may have become dissolute but is brought back to the straight and narrow path by his love for her. Seeing his good qualities, the heroine declares her love for him, often in a platonic or elliptical way. There are obstacles to their marriage which they eventually overcome. The final curtain falls.

Or the 'hero' may be the threat to the heroine's virtue which sends her on an Odyssean round of adventures, and only after he has

learnt to moderate his passion and play his part in the heroine's career can they reconcile their differences and marry.

Alternatively the threatening man who wants possession of the heroine may never learn his place as suitor, attempting to take the heroine by force. When it seems she has no other option in the matter the heroine will dramatically kill herself rather than enter into a relationship on someone else's terms.

Although she may die, the heroickess has no children and does not grow old. The whole of her life after the main narrative may be summed up in one generalised paragraph describing her country idyll or the fame her life and death have created.

Aspects of this life-history warrant further attention, since Cavendish opens out questions and paradoxes in conventional types of tale. Cavendish's views of marriage and childbirth were coloured by the conflict she saw between them and ambition. The fame a woman could achieve through writing and education might be an incentive not to marry, and Cavendish was aware that a husband and children were rarely compatible with a woman's aspirations. A woman could produce children of the body or children of the mind—Cavendish's children of fame were her writings—but not both. Very few of the women who were known for writing in the seventeenth century were also mothers.

These attitudes show through in the text: the death of the heroine's mother marks Cavendish's usually-negative view of the process of pregnancy and child-bearing as something that happened to other women and was often associated with tragedy. Good women die giving birth to daughters who will go on to earn fame; the bad

maid in a domestic triangle becomes pregnant to her master and is cast out like Hagar (NP: 36-7). The fallen innocent in "The Description of the Fondness of Parents and the Credulity of Youth" at first disguises her pregnancy by claiming she is ill with "a Timpany", and then hangs herself when her lover is shipped overseas by his wealthy family (NP: 50-52). In contrast, Affectionata-Travelia, who after all her journeys ends up happily married to the man who tried to rape her at the outset, does not embark upon such a risky and basically female venture as motherhood, although she and her husband "loved passionately" and "thrived moderately" (NP: 286).

In conclusion, although marriage was generally the death of a woman's artistic aspirations, Cavendish saw ways in which marriage itself could be an outlet and artifact of a woman's creative impulses—if entered into on her terms and in full awareness of the power play involved.

same self-sovereignty which grounded Cavendish's authorial activity was also a way of showing her romantic domination of powerful men, for even at her most omnipotent Cavendish carries with her the burden of her feminine subjection. In the tales of *Natures Pictures* Cavendish's projected protagonists are seldom permitted lasting rule of the realms they may briefly hold: they will either resign their interests to the men they marry or sacrifice all in a final dramatic gesture of self-destruction which is the only action they can conceive of in the face of masculine power.

### Ordered Bodies

*Natures Pictures* includes a number of analogies comparing state and body,<sup>23</sup> a metaphor used in the story of the belly in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*,<sup>24</sup> and most famously developed by Hobbes, a guest and sometime dependent of the Cavendish families, in *Leviathan*.<sup>25</sup> The seventeenth-century political version of the analogy described the state as one organism under

---

23 "Phancies Monarchy in the Land of Poetry" is one of many.

24 *Coriolanus* Act 1, Scene 1 gives Menenius's story of the belly, in which rebellious citizens are told:

The senators of Rome are this good belly,  
And you the multitudinous members. For examine  
Their counsels and their cares, digest things rightly  
Touching the weal o'th'common, you shall find  
No public benefit which you receive  
But it proceeds or comes from them to you, (lines 146-51).

The later Stuart emphasis on reason and the role of the brain (not to mention the different political system the metaphor is used to describe) probably accounts for the use of the head/king as director and controller of the body politic by Hobbes and Cavendish, rather than the belly/senate as source of general nourishment in a seventeenth-century version of the trickle-down effect.

25 *Leviathan* was first published in 1651. The metaphor appears also in *Behemoth*.

the control of the king its head. Civil war was a malady of state which could be likened to a grave physical illness. The metaphor could also be used the other way: to Cavendish the body functioned best when it was properly regulated, and not at all well when the rebellious organs were uncontrolled by the head, or the passions beyond the call of reason. Thus she wrote of "a long Civil War amongst my Passions, my Body being almost wasted to skin and bone for want of rest and nourishment" (NP: 130).

Faction was a feature of Cavendish's world which was seen in the state as civil war, in the individual as illness or disturbance of the mind, and in all things as the destruction of the artifacts of human culture. Such disorder, whether in the body corporal or the body politic, was anathema to Cavendish, and her inability to escape the experience of personal powerlessness in the face of traumatic events led her to construct her own fantasies of order, finding a way to build something reliable in a world where so much was fickle.

The shock of civil war and the horror at the decapitation of her royal *point de capiton* were powered by the symbolic significance of the loss of a central fixing point on which to base the image of self and the structure of the world. It was also one of the most symbolically significant events of the time, so it is no surprise that civil disorder is a background to many of the stories in *Natures Pictures*. Some of the tales obviously utilise their author's own experience and express Cavendish's grievances:

But soon after, a Civil War broke out; where these two Ladies Husbands being for the Emperour, after great Dangers, and many Wounds got in their Royal Masters services, with the loss of their Estates, and the banishment of their Persons,

were forced to wander into other Nations to live with Strangers upon cold Charity (NP: 125).

Or a "Tale perplex" in which the speaker, like Cavendish, returns from exile to seek maintenance from her husband's sequestered estates:

She said, I over sea to happ land went,  
My Husband being then in Banishment;  
His estate gone, and being very poor,  
I thought some means compassion might restore:  
But when I ask'd, no pity could I finde,  
Hard were their Hearts, and cruel every Minde (NP: 93).

Such descriptions of sacrifice and exile are common features of Cavendish's work, the familiar circumstances fuelling her internal conceptions.<sup>26</sup> Telling of her tragic situation was also self-justification and display of her loyalty.

Cavendish responded to factional dispute by glorifying the idea of the strictly-run stable state which functioned as a unity. In support of this ideal she drew on Machiavellian advice on government, the appropriation of the power of the Church by the State, Hobbes's description of the body politic, and an absolutism which pervaded her work. The reality of exile, however, demanded other approaches.

### **The Unified State: Stoicism**

In its time of defeat the cavalier court turned to ancient Rome for models, focusing on the ideals of political stability and conduct in

---

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, the chain of stories which deals primarily with civil war (NP: 88-93).

adversity to be found in stable government supported by public state religion and personal stoicism. Cavendish, already a devotee of stable government, found her absolutism supplemented by aspects of neostoicism:

At a time of the most bitter religious, political and social conflicts, it provided a practical philosophy, based on reason, Christian morality and classical learning, for virtually every sphere of life. It by-passed the deadly disputes of the theologians and the disruptive struggles over the form of governments and the distribution of power within states. In their place it put the increase of the power and efficiency of the state itself and the political and social discipline of its citizens through the effects of education. This eminently useful and respectable philosophy found favour with the "establishments" in both monarchies and republics (Koenigsberger and B. Oestreich; intro to Oestreich: viii).

As well as its promise of stability and freedom from faction through emphasis on the centralised power of the state, neostoicism also suggested a way of living in times of hardship which chimed with what Cavendish had observed and admired in her mother:

But in such misfortunes my Mother was of an Heroick Spirit, in suffering patiently where there is no remedy, or to be industrious where she thought she could help; She was of a grave Behaviour, and had such a Majestick Grandeur, as it were continually hung about her, that it would strike a kind of awe to the beholders (NP "A true Relation": 377).

Neostoicism was a useful philosophy in defeat, encouraging its followers to bear their trials without complaint. It was part of the intellectual environment in France and the Netherlands, where Cavendish spent the years of her exile, and is a pervasive influence on her work. Cavendish's awareness of the philosophy is shown



when she describes the heroine of "Of two Ladyes of different Humours" as a "Stoick" (NP: 124), but it reveals itself also in the workings of plot and philosophy apparent in those tales in which the protagonist is rewarded with fame for choosing death: a view which contrasts directly with the later Christian proscription of self-slaughter which appears in other of Cavendish's stories. For as well as offering a way of life, neostoicism publicised the idea of noble suicide and the grand gesture which would have one lose all in the service of an ideal. Seneca's suicide at Nero's order was seen as a prime example of loyal obedience at whatever cost to the whim of one's sovereign: cavaliers who had lost fortunes and family in support of the royalist cause took it to heart, reading and discussing Seneca's works.<sup>27</sup>

So neostoicism offered Cavendish models of conduct in life and in death. It appealed to both rational pragmatists and those who sought the dramatic gesture. And it offered Cavendish a setting for her incandescent absolutism.

### **Absolute monarchy**

It was not hard to accept that stable government was a good thing, but Cavendish seems to have anticipated difficulty in persuading her readers—most of them English living under the Commonwealth—that absolute monarchy was the best way to achieve stable government.<sup>28</sup> Her support for monarchy is

---

27 Although "Everybody took from Stoic ethics what he wanted to hear and needed to know" (Oestreich: 33).

28 The fact that Cavendish's determinedly royalist works were printed in London at all is a matter of some surprise to modern readers more used to the idea of political censorship.

everywhere apparent, but perhaps best summarised in the she-Anchoret's reply to the Moral Philosophers' question on the best form of government for a commonwealth:

She answered, Monarchicall; For as one Sun is sufficient to give Light and heat to all the severall creatures in the world; so one Governor is sufficient to give Lawes and Rules to the severall members of a Commonwealth; besides, said she, no good government can be without union, and union in [corrected by hand to "is"] singularity not in plurality; for union is drawn to a point, when numbers make Division, Extraction, Subtraction, which oftentimes brings distraction, and distraction confusions (NP: 317).

Cavendish herself was an absolutist from childhood, her political views being set long before she was aware of the disruptions of civil war. Monarchy was dear to a class such as hers, which had derived its identity, along with the more tangible rewards of wealth and land, from service to the crown. It was in this group's interests to retain the sovereign as provider and protector. And of course absolutism also appealed as a template for social order. Cavendish was committed to images of control, and her writings show her scepticism that others would fulfil their social obligations if left to their own devices. A strict structure was one of Cavendish's ways of assuring her security.

Her first attempt at a persuasive argument was that royalism was no worse than republicanism, and could as easily provide the basis for a happy and productive centralised state:

But the truth is, the Ant and the Bee resemble more in their wise Industry, than in their Government of the Commonwealth; for the Bees are a Monarchical

Government, as any may observe; and the Ants are a Republick.

But by this we may perceive, it is not such or such kinds of Governments, but such and such ways of governing, that make a Commonwealth flourish with Plenty, Conveniency, Curiosity, Peace, and Tranquillity; for the Monarchical government of the Bees is as wise and as happy as the Republick Commonwealth of the Ants, &c. (NP "A Moral Tale of the Ant and the Bee": 165).

Cavendish's second argument was that the single focus on a sovereign—the one who delivered the final word—was of its nature far less prone to the development of factions and divisiveness than was a committee in which the many members had different and potentially contradictory objectives. At least with a monarch you knew where you were, so Cavendish was prepared to defend the abuses of monarchy on the grounds that certainty—even if it was the certainty of tyranny—was preferable to the doubt and conflict of a council:

the Gods take a particular care to indue a Royal Head with Understanding, and a Royal Heart with Justice; for inhereditary Royalty is sacred, since the Gods anoint those lines to that Dignity.

But those that have not a right by inheritance, the Gods take no care of, nay many time the Gods punish with plagues and other miseries, those People that make a King of their own choosing, and justly, since Royalties are gods Viceregents, or Deputies on Earth; for as the Gods are chief in Heaven, and rule the Works of Nature as they will, so Royalties are chief on Earth, and rule the rest of Mankind as they please.

But, said the other, if they rule not well, they are to give an account.

Yes, answered the other, but not unto those Men they rule, but to the Gods the placed them in their Thrones (NP: 113-4).

Then they asked her, if a foolish King might not bring a Common wealth to ruin sooner than a Councell?

She said no; for, said she, the plurality breeds faction, which faction causeth more evill than one foolish head can make, or bring about (NP: 327).

Arguments such as this are surprisingly Machiavellian, and Machiavellian in a sense which borrows more from the actual writings of Niccolo Machiavelli than from the demonic Machiavel of English popular culture. Cavendish changes her terminology from "King" to "Prince" as she expounds the idea from *The Prince* that a ruler is better to be feared than loved if fear produces the greater good of a peaceful and unified state. "So a prince must not worry if he incurs reproach for his cruelty so long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal" (Machiavelli: 95).

Then they asked her if a Tyrant King were not worse, than a factious Councell.

She said no, for said she, a Tyrant King might make good Lawes, and keep Peace, and maintain supreme power and authority; but a factious Councell, said she, will break all Lawes, do no Justice, keep no Peace, obstruct authority, and overthrow supreme power, but, said she, that Kingdom, is happiest that lives under a Tyrant Prince, for when the people are afraid of their Prince, there is Peace, but where the Prince is afraid of the people, there is War; and there is no miserie like a Civill War (NP: 327).<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Cavendish advances another of Machiavelli's ideas when she advocates using a favourite as a scapegoat to deflect the people's anger from the monarch:

But a King, who would raigne long and peaceably, if he will have a Favorite, must have a Favorite to be a buckler, between him, and the

This exposition of the ideas of so fervent a believer in the power of absolute rule as Machiavelli is appropriate to Cavendish's own political beliefs; a matter reaffirmed when the two writers of *Politicks* whose works she permits to remain after the cleansing of heaven's library are "*Achitophell* and *Machiavell*" (NP: 359). Elsewhere, however, Cavendish—good woman that she was—mentions his name in a pejorative context, speaking of Bawds, who "have more devices and policies to deceive young Virgins, Wives, or Widows, than Machiavel or the wisest Statesmen, to cosen the people" (NP: 346). It would appear that although Cavendish knew of Machiavelli's ideas she did not always associate them with the man himself, instead thinking of him as the demonic Machiavel. This contrasting use of names with general ideas of their work mixed with popular conceptions shows an apparent ignorance of sources which is typical of Cavendish. It may have been that she simply did not know the origins of the ideas she garnered from the conversations around her, and as has been shown it was important to her that she stand alone, spinning her works from her own unique fancies and dependent on none for her inspiration because her godlike genesis of self and created world would be undermined by acknowledgement that others had contributed to her work. All institutions and knowledge should, in her humble opinion, support the greatness of sovereignty rather than making their own demands.

## Religion

---

rest of his subjects, for he must not take his Favorites faults upon him, but lay his faults on the Favorite (NP: 328).

Religion was one powerful nexus of organisation and personal belief which Cavendish sought to utilise as a pillar of monarchy. In her ideal stable state, religion was a bond rather than the divisive force it had been in the English Civil War. The Cavendish family attitude to organised religion was peculiarly lacking in the theism generally taken as a religious foundation, instead seeing religious institutions as structures of social ritual which maintained or subverted monarchy. A tastefully quiet system of personal belief might co-exist with this: both Cavendishes were known to say:

That there should be more Praying, and less Preaching; for much Preaching breeds Faction; but much Praying causes Devotion.<sup>30</sup>

Margaret and William Cavendish were alike in the views they published, believing with religious fervour in the social hierarchy associated with monarchy, and happiest with religious institutions when they were utilised to maintain that hierarchy. The people's Protestant religious activities were subversive threats to the authority of the king matched in their disruptive power only by the papists' belief that loyalty to a spiritual ruler in Rome was more important than loyalty to a temporal ruler in England. Neither approach could be tolerated. Firth summarised William Cavendish's advice to the King thus:

Henceforth religious zeal must be systematically repressed, preachers controlled, and only permitted to deliver printed sermons licensed by the bishops.... Newcastle regarded the Bishops as a sort of ecclesiastical policemen, intended to maintain order in their dioceses, and to keep the king

---

<sup>30</sup> Cavendish lists this as one of the aphorisms of her husband in the section of his biography headed "I have heard my Lord say" (Firth, ed.: 212).

informed about the movements of schismatics and papists. Episcopacy was the only form of government compatible with monarchy, which Popery and Presbytery alike tended to destroy (Firth: xxiii).

Cavendish herself sets out a view of the ideal role of religion in the analogy "Phancyes Monarchy in the Land of Poetry":

As for the Church, Faith and Zeal were the two Archbishops; which Bishops were sworn to consecrate none but Moral Virtues, to preach the Good Life, devesting all several Sects, Opinions, Superstitious Idolatry, and the like. Neither were they suffered to make Lectures of Learning, because they allwayes preach Controversies, puzzling Belief with nice Distinctions, vain Phantasms, and empty Words, without Sense (NP: 134).

Independent thought was not to be encouraged in the masses, being too dangerous a matter for common minds. Believing that much harm had been done by each chambermaid's possession of an English bible, the Cavendishes would have all texts which might arouse faction printed in Latin and restricted to the scholars in their ivory towers.

The pragmatic and slightly skeptical attitude of Cavendish's milieu shows also in its patronage and support of writers such as Hobbes. Not exactly atheist, the Cavendish circles around the Newcastles and their cousins the Devonshires seem to have thought that God was a long way away and unlikely to get involved in human affairs. Displays of piety were pointless in terms of propitiating God, but they could serve a useful social function: a view which looked back to the state religion of Rome and paralleled Cavendish's opinions on the uses of ceremony and dress to affirm the social hierarchy. Hobbes recommended that since there was little to choose between

religions, one should take the one the monarch gave in order that the state not be divided by differences of personal belief. The king who was also the high priest—or as William Cavendish would have it, the pope in his own kingdom—was the true fulfilment of absolutism.<sup>31</sup>

So outwardly Cavendish remained loyal to her English state religion despite the fashion for Catholicism in the Queen's Court of Henrietta Maria.<sup>32</sup> The religious views expressed in "The she-Anchoret," however, use Christian terminology to describe an increasingly atheistic world-view.

Then they asked her, whether she thought there were a Heaven and a Hell.

She answered, that in nature there was a Hell and a Heaven, a God, and a Devill, good Angells and bad; salvation and damnation; for, said she, paine and trouble is a Hell, the one to torment the body, the other the mind.

Likewise, said she, health and pleasure is a Heaven, which gives the body rest, and the minde Tranquillity; also, said she, the naturall God is Truth, the naturall Devil falshood, the one seeks to save, the other to deceive, the good Angells are Peace and plenty; the evill are Warrs, and Famine; Light is the beatificall vision, darknesse the diadem nature; death is the damnation, Life the salvation; and Morall vertue is the naturall Religion, and Morall Philosophers are natures Priests; Which preach, and seem to practise a good life (NP: 316-7).

---

31 Firth quotes Newcastle: "and thus shall your Majesty be not only an absolute king, but pope within your dominions" (Firth: xxiii).

32 She married in one of the few places in Paris where adherents of the Church of England could worship freely: the private chapel of Sir Richard and Lady Brown, English Residents in Paris (Jones 52).



Yet however much she personally may explain religion in godless terms, she cleaves to it as a necessary prop of state for the masses, since once monarchies are pulled down:

Then into wicked States such Kingdoms go,  
Where Virtue's beaten out, no truth they know;  
And all Religion flyes away for fear;  
And Atheism is preached every where.  
Their magistrates by bribes do govern all,  
No Suit is heard, but what injustice call (NP: 93).

Whatever her personal belief (a matter not altogether easy to resolve) the gods of Cavendish's fiction were taken from Roman legend, and their role is often mythical or metaphorical. They were often called upon and occasionally active. Although Cavendish's characters present the reader with many of the theological conflicts of the time, all discussion of religious matters is carried out in Roman and 'scientific' garb. "Jove" is a representation of the Judaeo-Christian god, while still retaining the trappings of polytheism and relationships to others in the Roman pantheon, a blend which produces strange juxtapositions. Speaking of a temple to Diana, Cavendish writes:

In former times, when false Devotion reign'd,  
A Church was built, although to use profan'd,  
Was Consecrated as Diana's right,  
Who was their Goddess of the Moon-shine bright.  
But afterwards, when Truth with Zeal did flame,  
It Christened was, and bore Joves' mighty name,  
And dedicated to the Sun above  
Then marryed was, became his Spouse and Love (NP: 90).

The female deity relegated to the role of consort to a later male god is an image frequent in early mythologies and has been taken to

symbolise either the effect on prehistoric mother-worshipping cultures of patriarchal invaders or the mother-reared child's transferral of worship from the phallic mother to the father in patriarchal societies. The second of these readings makes for speculation on the life-producing union Cavendish describes between Jove and Nature, introducing a personified abstract to the equation.<sup>33</sup> This is symbolically significant of the union of idea and matter, but is also important because it shows that the single god is not omnipotent: the idea alone is not enough to produce life. This suggests that unity is perhaps not the final word, and that despite her apparent Aristotelian bias in the gendering of form and matter Cavendish may follow Heraclitus in recognising the importance of friction to fertility.

### Problems with Unity

Although the texts overtly favour the harmony and prosperity of unified peace over the internal dissent which turns the One against itself, Cavendish's responses to this, as to most things, are mixed. Cavendish was aware that the complacency of peace could itself

---

33 A tale such as "The Marriage of Life and Death" is entirely about the inter-relationships of such abstractions, which are sometimes most extraordinary:

But at his Wedding, old Father Time, which looked the youngest, although he was the oldest in the Company, and danced the nimblest and best, making several changes in his Dances; besides, he trod so gently, and moved so smoothly, that none could perceive how he did turn, and winde, and lead about. And being wiser than all the rest with long Experience, he behaved himself so handsomely, insinuated so subtilly, courted so civilly, that he got all the Ladyes Affections; and being dextrous, got Favours from every one of them, and some extraordinary ones; for he devirginated Youth, Beauty, Pleasure, Prosperity, and all the five Senses, but could not corrupt Wit, Virtue, nor the Graces (NP: 137).

Cavendish's eclecticism brings together saints, gods and science, using whichever mode or blend of modes best suits her intent at the time; so the gods may also appear associated with the planets which bear their names, or in an alchemical language of elements and humours.

foster dissent, and that her ideal kingdom might carry within itself the seeds of its own destruction:

A Kingdome which long time had lived in Peace,  
Her people rich with Plenty, fat with Ease,  
With Pride were haughty grown, Pride Envy bred,  
From Envy Factions grew, then Mischief spread;  
And Libels every where were strewed about,  
Which after soon a civil war broke out (NP: 88).

There are two points to note here: firstly that the initial step in this kingdom's fall from unified grace was pride, the first sin of Adam and the basis of all other sins. Cavendish held—simultaneously or alternately—two conflicting views of pride. Pride per se was a sin which led people to disrupt order by aspiring to things above their station, or attracted the wrathful attention of the spiritual or temporal powers. Contrasting with this was the renaissance notion that aspiration was the way to get on in the world: pride became the ground of a view of the individual and the individual's endeavour which showed itself in the self-construction and pursuit of fame which motivated Cavendish. Yet even among those groups affected by the newer emphasis, the codes for women were more conservative than those for men and the self-assurance associated with pride was less acceptable in a woman than in her male counterpart. Although Cavendish benefited from increasing acceptance of ambition, aspiring to her own personal fame, she was also wary of it: her commitment to romantic domination may well have been strengthened by fear of the consequences of overstepping certain boundaries.

The second point is that although in theory she preferred peace and abhorred faction, Cavendish was familiar with civil dissent and the

dramatic setting it provided for heroic endeavour and famous acts. The family of her birth was not enobled, she claims, because it would not buy a title and there was no opportunity to earn one:

my Father did not esteem Titles, unless they were gained by Heroick Actions; and the Kingdome being in a happy Peace with all other Nations, and in it self being governed by a wise King, King James, there was no imployments for Heroick Spirits (NP: 368).

Bravely defending beleaguered order could bring fame and show the strength of one's character, so a certain amount of threat to the established order was desirable to give gallants the chance to prove themselves and show their worth. The case is parallel to that of the woman previously mentioned who decries the attempts made upon her virtue but whose own qualities can only be proved by her steadfastness in the face of such threats. The challenge of threat and dissent is necessary to the manifestation of both virtue and valour: the Other is needed to define the One.

### **Metaphors of Absolutism: The Sun King and the Subject**

In theory a spiritual God seems to have been another symbol of absolutism for Cavendish, since she describes the pivotal position of the temporal sovereign in terms of the ordering function which she saw as God's role in the natural world: "a good King is the Centre of a Commonwealth, as God is the Center of Nature" (NP: 326). The king is the fixed sun around which the movable planets revolve; the source and ground of meaning. Sovereign and subject define each other, although the subject's need for the sovereign is greater because the true subject "becomes merely abject in the

monarch's absence," while the sovereign is still centred, still ruler though without a temporal realm (Gallagher: 28-9).

The sovereign-subject dyad raises issues of Othering, since although in one sense the sovereign—centred, predominantly self-defining, and subservient to none—is One, with all Others signifying only by their relation to the monarch, the relation is usually seen from the point of view of the male subject, to whom both sovereign and non-subject woman were Other. The male subject was a relative creature to the king, but by virtue of that role and that relation such men gained the ability to set themselves up as limited sovereigns within their own homes, fulfilling the requirements of deference to superiors which enabled them to dominate those further down the chain. The man fulfilled his masculine role by virtue of his subjection and subjectivity, but a woman like Cavendish was always Other to the male subject, an otherness which could take the forms of servant or sovereign.

### **Woman as Sovereign**

Despite her absolutism Cavendish herself was outside the bounds of the paramount relation of sovereign and subject since the state did not recognise a woman as a full subject. Lacking a place in the conventional sovereign-subject dyad, Cavendish should have been in a limbo of the identity; yet she chose to redefine the situation, since if she had not the model of subjectivity which defined her menfolk, she lacked also their pattern of subjection. Not deriving masculine privilege from the need to do homage in order to demand homage from those further down the scale, Cavendish was free to construct herself in ways which were not available to men.

The irony of Cavendish, who so desired to be unique, defending a social structure in which the only unique individual was the sovereign was inverted as she recast the absolutist metaphor with herself as focus. For what could Cavendish be, if not a subject? Catherine Gallagher suggests that the history of Tudor Queens Regnant—women who did participate in the sovereign-subject relationship—meant the only role Cavendish could envision for a woman was as sovereign.<sup>34</sup> So Cavendish would be sovereign over her own world of fancy:

I am... as Ambitious as ever any of my Sex was, is, or can be; which is the cause, That though I cannot be *Henry* the fifth, or *Charles* the Second; yet, I will endeavour to be, *Margaret* the First: and, though I have neither Power, Time, nor Occasion, to be a great Conqueror, like *Alexander*, or *Cesar* ; yet, rather than not be Mistress of a world, since fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made One of my own... thus believing, or, at least, hoping, that no creature can, or will, Envy me for this world of mine (Cavendish *The Blazing World* : introduction).

As sovereign, Cavendish took on the autotelic, and therefore paradoxically 'masculine,' role of the queen regnant. Claiming that as a woman she was neither recognised by the state nor bound by it, she developed her freedom in order to be absolute monarch both of herself and of the world of her imaginings, since in the world of the

---

<sup>34</sup> "[M]uch in Cavendish's texts suggests that the absolutist desire, the desire to be the sovereign monarch, itself derives from a certain female disability: not from the inability to be a monarch but from her inability to be a full *subject* of the monarch. Of the two available positions, subject and monarch, monarch is the only one Cavendish can imagine a woman occupying. And this, of course, accorded with her historical experience; women were excluded from all state offices except that of monarch.... Since the only model of political being available to women in Cavendish's writings is that of monarch, a woman's ambition can only take the absolute form" (Gallagher: 27).

imagination the author—even a female one—was despot and source of all meaning. The Ideal-I which Cavendish created in the mirror of her writing was altogether more powerful and lasting a creature than the Cavendish who wrote and was tied to the uncontrolled and turbulent movements of the body.

Cavendish's sovereignty, however, is of a world which does not exist, a world she hopes will not excite envy or attempts at conquest, because one like it is available to anyone with the creativity to shape one. She is grandiosely a sovereign, and her kingdom, which has no physical existence, cannot be taken from her and is a most powerful nothing because it is her imagination and her concept of herself. It is this sovereignty of her own world which becomes the basis of Cavendish's own—ironically-named—subjectivity: her conception of herself as author and architect of a world, with a divinity's power to shape and record.

Cavendish's need for control shapes her imagined world. The Cavendish who did not trust people to work without supervision, and who was prevented from conquering an empire anyway, decided that real empires were simply too problematic. No king could know all that went on in a kingdom, advisers had their own divisive motivations, and the real difficulties of a real realm chipped away at the unifying power of the absolutist ideal. Cavendish is fond of listing the ways in which seventeenth-century versions of "shrinkage" deprived one of one's rightful returns, and that the best life was to have a household small enough for personal supervision while eschewing the cares of state.<sup>35</sup> This

---

<sup>35</sup> See especially "The Tale of a Traveller" for the development of this idea (NP: 273-286).

conclusion appears to be compounded of a mixture of sour grapes, stoicism, and another inversion of values associated with the exiled monarch and the security of the immaterial: Cavendish's worlds of fantasy were worlds in which she could truly be sovereign, having an absolute control of her kingdom which was impossible for any actual monarch. The non-existent empire was the only one in which the ruler was creator and orderer, utterly in control. In her own world, Cavendish could be blasphemously powerful, making the substance of all things from the stuff of her imaginings.

The other way in which a woman could achieve such power was through a godlike tyranny over real subjects, and the remnants of the courtly love code offered a model in which this was—at least for a time—possible.



## Beautiful Tyrants:

### Transcending and Focusing the Feminine



While Cavendish was ruling her world of fancy she was also experimenting with other ways women could hold demesnes. The clearest and most controversial statement Cavendish made on the position of women in the state is contained in her books called *Sociable Letters*. The passage has excited a certain amount of comment, and both text and response contribute to readings of *Natures Pictures*. The version presented here is taken from Catherine Gallagher's article:

As for the matter of Governments, we Women understand them not; yet if we did, we are excluded from intermeddling therewith, and almost from being sworn thereto; we are not tied, nor bound to State of Crown; we are free, not Sworn to Allegiance, nor do we take the Oath of Supremacy; we are not made Citizens of the Commonwealth, we hold no Offices, nor bear we any Authority therein; we are accounted neither Useful in Peace, nor Serviceable in War; and if we be not Citizens in the Commonwealth, I know no reason we should be Subjects to the Commonwealth: And the truth is, we are no Subjects (*Sociable Letters*, quoted in Gallagher: 28).

This argument shows Cavendish's awareness of her situation as a woman within an absolutist state, yet, powerful as the metaphor obviously was for her, her presentation of it shows slippage between the concepts of subject and citizen. Not a citizen, a woman could take no direct action in most public affairs, yet in general she was still subject to law: permitted the punishments, but few of the privileges, handed out by the state, and with no direct say in how

the goods of the state were allocated, nor in the law to which she was subject. Her basic statement was that it was unfair that women be subject to the state unless that subjection is part of a package which includes the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Her statement that "We are no Subjects" has elicited comment because it is so promising a pun in the discourses of current literary theory. In the normal run of things Cavendish would not have been what we consider a subject: in her assumed monarchy she attempts to construct herself as not only a unified subject but a focus of self-generated meaning. Although Cavendish may have desired a unified subjectivity, however, her situation, and still more her project, were sites of intolerable conflict. At a time of internal and external civil war, Cavendish longed for impossibly harmonious unities and sought safety in a controlled environment.

Yet the absolute and unique monarchy of the woman who writes is not so definite as Gallagher would have us believe, because she truncated her quotation of Cavendish's words: "And the truth is, we are no Subjects, *unless it be unto our Husbands*" (*Sociable Letters*: 27; emphasis added). The missing words reassert the relative nature of women's role and act as a reminder that even Regnant Queens were subject to their spouses. The Duke in "The Contract" uses the image of domestic sovereignty most overtly, describing his earlier marriage to the child Delitia in the same language that would be used of a monarch's relation to crown and kingdom:

Said the Duke [to Delitia], you cannot want an owner whilst I live, for I had, nor have no more power to resigne the interest I have in you, than Kings to resign their Crowns that comes by succession, for the right lyes in the Crown, not in

the man, and though I have played the tyrant, and deserved to be uncrowned, yet none ought to take it off my head, but death, nor have I power to throw it from my self, death onely must make way for a successor (NP: 203).

This extreme subjection of women would be profoundly limiting, except that Cavendish sees that women can have others swear to be their subjects, and that women's subjects need not be merely those below them on the social ladder. In the realm of love and the cult of the beloved lady a beautiful woman could gain the subservience of the greatest men in the land. As helpmetes and inspirations women could control and influence men, so ruling the world in a delightful way without the burdens of the day-to-day running of state and industry. The quotation continues as Cavendish turns again to romantic domination:

we are no Subjects, unless it be to our Husbands, and not always to them, for sometimes we usurp their Authority, or else by flattery we get their good wills to govern; but if Nature had not befriended us with Beauty, and other good Graces, to help us to insinuate our selves into men's Affections, we should have been more inslaved than any other of Natur's Creatures she hath made; but Nature be thank'd she hath been so bountiful to us, as we oftener inslave men, than men inslave us; they seem to govern the world, but we really govern the world in that we govern men (*Sociable Letters*: 27).

So Cavendish's sovereignty has delivered her to the notion of the queen of courtesy, an ideal which reaches its apotheosis in the final part of Cavendish's famous *Female Orations*:

we women are much more favoured by Nature than men, in giving us such beauties, features, shapes, graceful demeanor, and such insinuating and enticing attractives, that men are

forced to admire us, love us, and be desirous of us; insomuch that rather than not have and enjoy us, they will deliver to our disposals their power, persons, and lives, enslaving themselves to our will and pleasures; also, we are their saints, whom they adore and worship; and what can we desire more than to be men's tyrants, destinies, and goddesses?<sup>36</sup>

This very notion, however, as one of Cavendish's all-or-nothing alternatives for women, is a reaction to their actual powerlessness. In this she foreshadowed Halifax, who balanced restriction with reward by claiming that woman's natural disadvantages were more than compensated by their ability to enthrall and cajole:

You have it in your power not only to free yourselves but to subdue your masters, and without violence throw both their natural and legal authority at your feet.... you have stronger influences, which, well managed, have more force in your behalf than all our privileges and jurisdictions can pretend to have against you. You have more strength in your looks than we have in our laws, and more power by your tears than we have by our arguments (Halifax: 277-8).

Although men had power, women—especially beautiful and manipulative ones—had influence over men. This influence, accompanied by the specialness of being placed on a pedestal, was offered to women as an alternative to the power enjoyed by men. Such romantic domination had its attractions, and just enough grounding in the way Stuart society worked that it could be made to look realistic. It was also socially normative, diverting women from the pursuit of direct personal power by giving them

---

36 This concludes Cavendish's *Female Orations*, published in 1662 and quoted here from *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (ed. Gilbert and Gubar: 75-6). Spelling and punctuation appear to have been partially standardised in this text.

something else to work for and making it seem that they had something to lose by choosing a more direct but less-feminine approach.

After venturing into the realm of the Arts and Sciences and seeking immortal fame through the offspring of her mind, Cavendish returns with a vengeance to the physical endowments which Nature has bestowed on women. Whatever the state of a woman's mind, in Stuart society her future would more than likely be determined by the comeliness of her appearance.

### **Beauty**

Cavendish's responses to beauty and the youth she associates with it are strongly gendered: they are features necessary to a woman, which she sometimes considers a drawback in a man. The qualities of experience and nobility of spirit which may be acquired with age are important to men, but a woman's only claim to the public eye is her beauty. The idea is the same as the emphasis on women's virtue—the defining characteristic for a woman is something which she has in inaction, and can only lose with age and experience. In "The strict Associate," Cavendish expresses this idea with force:

Youth and Beauty appears worse in Men, than Age and Deformity in Women; wherefore, said she, if it were in my power, I would make a Law that all young Men should be kept to their Studies, so long as their Effeminate Beauty doth last; and old Women should be put into Cloysters when their Youth and Beauty is past (NP: A26).

Despite her emphasis on the virtue of the inward self, Cavendish's female protagonists are almost always well-favoured and physically

attractive. Not for her the plain but witty or the ugly and generous-hearted: her characters may have more wit than good looks, but they have good looks in abundance. And although Cavendish claims to write of the triumphs of Virtue and the growth of the inward self, some of the most poignant moments in the tales accompany the loss of beauty:

A Man in love was with a Lady fair,  
 And for her sake would curl, perfume his Hair;  
 Professions thousands unto her did make,  
 And swore for her a Pilgrimage would take.  
 I swear, said he, Truth shall for me be bound,  
 Constant to be, whil'st Life is in me found.  
 With all his Rivals he would quarrels make,  
 In Duels fought he often for her sake.  
 It chanc'd this Lady sick was, like to die  
 Of the small Pox, Beauties great Enemy.  
 When she was well, her Beauty decay'd quite,  
 He did forsake her, and her Friendship slight;  
 Excuses makes, her cannot often see,  
 Then asketh leave a traveller to be.  
 And thus, poor Lady, when her Beauty's gone,  
 Without her Lover she may sit alone (NP: 8).

Beauty commands attention and affection. Some of the sources of this interest may be undesirable, but at least they give the person a social context for definition of self. To cease to be beautiful is never presented as a process of winnowing the caring wheat from the lustful chaff, but as something which leaves the protagonist alone. Beauty may be a snare, but at least it encourages company.

Loss of beauty is the final straw in a Job-like tale of affliction called "A Description of the Fall of foolish and self-conceited Pride." A rich and beautiful Lady becomes conceited as a result of flattery, and

is punished when the gods take away the gifts of fortune and nature which first made her a target of praise. Stripped of her possessions, she is left

rich with Beauty, but of Lands bereft;  
In which she pleasure took, although but poor,  
Of Fortunes Goods, of Natures Gifts had store (NP: 76).

The loss of wealth is unfortunate, but touches the woman far less than what is to come:

But when the Gods did see her still content,  
At last unto her Body Sickness sent;  
She patient was, her Beauty still did last:  
But when that they their Judgements on that cast,  
Making a grave to bury Beauty in,  
Which Beauty once did tempt the Saints to sin;  
Because her face so full of Pock-holes were,  
That none could judge that Beauty once dwelt there.  
Then she did sit and weep, turn'd day to Night,  
Asham'd she was to shew her Face the Light (NP: 77).

It is acceptable in Cavendish's terms to be a beautiful invalid: to bear that sort of adversity with patience is praiseworthy and very feminine. This woman's tragedy is to regain health at the cost of beauty. The loss of things changes her situation and her idea of what is happening to her: the loss of beauty changes her conception of her self. After three hundred days of mourning she turns to religion and the gods she once spurned, in the hope that, although outwardly she is spotted and maculate, her soul may be unblemished.

Good Gods, forgive my Vanity and Pride,  
Let not my Soul with sinfull spots be dy'd;  
Let thy great mercies skour those spots off clean,

That by thy Justice may no spots be seen (NP: 77).<sup>37</sup>

Coming to a realisation that it is her immortal soul that really matters, the heroine repents of her pride and retires to a nunnery where she dies young. The resolution to this story feels inevitable and clichéd (despite a moment's curiosity as to whether the gods would step in with some divine plastic surgery)—it shows someone finding consolation by giving value to something intangible which they can hope to have, having been deeply hurt by irrevocable loss. The emotional power of the story lies not in the heroine's discovery of the narrow path of humility, but in the blow to her identity caused by her loss of beauty. For all Cavendish's talk of rational love being love of good qualities, there is never any suggestion that the scarred heroine may find love as a result of her spiritual development. It was amorous love, court-ly love, the sort of love Cavendish claims to fear and despise, which attached itself to good-looking women in her social position and, wanted or not, was an important element in the way they came to perceive themselves.

Yet beauty faded, and a woman who had built her life and self on beauty would eventually find she had built on very shaky ground. Along with the other things of the material world, beauty could be lost or taken away. Cavendish's response to the possibility of this loss is to place value on internal or spiritual qualities which are more lasting: although beauty will ensnare a husband, it is best to persuade the man that he really loves you for your virtue, since you can continue to be a virtuous wife long after your beauty is

---

<sup>37</sup> This is one of the clearest formulations of the spiritual clearasil approach to religion.



gone. To this end, an older husband—who is more aware of the value of virtue and less blinded by beauty—is preferable to a young gallant, as the Vice-Roy persuades the Dutchess [sic] in “The Contract”:

that Woman is the happiest that marries an antient Man; for he adores her Virtue more than her Beauty, and his Love continues; though her Beauty is gone; he sets a price of Worth upon the Honour and Reputation of his Wife, uses her civilly, and gives her Respect, as Gallant Men ought to do to a tender Sex, which makes others to do the like (NP: 206).

This argument works well on the Dutchess, who is bitter at being displaced in her husband’s affections by Delitia, the beautiful young woman who was betrothed to him as a child, but does not succeed with Delitia, although her aged uncle tries hard to match her to the same Vice-Roy:

And how, said he, do you like the Viceroy.

As well, said she, as I can like a Thing that Time hath worn out of fashion.

So, said he, I perceive you despise Age: but let me tell you, that what Beauty and Favour Time takes from the Body, he gives double proportions of Knowledge and Understanding to the Minde (NP: 195).

Delitia is not convinced: she will pretend to follow her uncle’s counsel, but her desire is for the dramatic gesture and union with the man she discovers to be her one-time betrothed. The opposing motivations of prudence and drama are recursive themes:

Prudence is to foresee the worst, and provide the best we can for our selves, by shunning the dangerous wayes, and choosing the best; and my Application is, that you must shun the dangerous wayes of Beauty, and choose Riches and

Honour, as the best for your self (NP, the Uncle in "The Contract": 195).

In other places in the text this seems a supremely sensible course of action, but here it is cast in a mercenary light. Delitia's motives are at once purer and more melodramatic. Despite her careful education and the cultivation of her mind by correct Cavendishian principles it is Delitia's beauty, the flesh made transcendently divine, which (gets others to) open(s) doors for her. Arriving veiled she is refused entry until she reveals her beauty:

Now by my troth, said [the Door-keeper], thou hast such a pleasing Face, none can deny thee: but now I look upon you better, you shall not go in.

Why Sir? said she.

Why, said he, you will make the Painter and the Poet lose their design, for one expects to enter in at the Ears of the Assembly, the other at their Eyes, and your Beauty will blinde the one, and stop the other; besides, said he, all the Ladies will curse me.

Heaven forbid, said she, I should be the cause of Curses; and to prevent them I will return back again.

Nay Lady, said he, I have not the power to let you go back, wherefore you may pass.

Sir, said she, I must have this Gentleman along with me.

Even who you please, said she [sic], I can deny you nothing, Angels must be obeyed (NP: 191).

Delitia leaves early and unknown in Cinderella-like fashion, so that "many did think she was a Vision, or some Angel which appear'd, and then vanished away", but—again like Cinderella—"the sparks of her Beauty had set their Tinder Hearts on Fire" for "her Beauty had left such Stings behind it, especially in the Breast of the Viceroy and the Duke, that they could not rest" (NP: 192).

Throughout this process Delitia is shown to be artless, choosing for purely symbolic reasons dresses which just happen to display her charms to the best advantage, and uncertain what to make of the love-sickness she herself begins to feel. Her beauty is an agent apart from herself, stinging, snaring, and striking dumb without her overt knowledge or intention. The power it demands for her is dramatic; at her next entrance

all the Crowds of People, as in a fright, started back, as if they were surprized with some Divine Object, making a Lane, in which she pass'd through; and the Keepers of the Doors were struck mute, there was no resistance, all was open and free to enter (NP: 193).

An excess of beauty did not, as might be thought, draw attention to physicality; it transcended it, becoming pure and ethereal. In the freshness of youth the beauty of form could surpass the frailty of matter. Age and conflict—especially the conflicts of trying to preserve the purity of beauty and artful innocence—showed the reassertion of matter. One way a Cavendish heroine could avoid the chaotic degeneration of matter was to die young and beautiful and be immortalised in unchanging fame. A large number of them take this course as part of a project of self-assertion, as the next section will show.

## Dying for Fame:

### Death and Wasting as Creative Self-Denial



The career trajectories of Cavendish's women play into the stereotype which says that women are only finally validated by death, especially by dying for a noble cause. Only when one is dead does one enter into the histories, mythologisable, truly famous, purified from the taint of the flesh. Desire for control and the consequent attraction of the disembodied self was associated with a denial of the body which expressed itself in fasting, purging and bleeding, and ultimately in the desire for death. It has already been mentioned that today Cavendish might be diagnosed as anorectic, with all the burden of theory about goodness, control and self-assertion that that entails. Awareness of this possibility in the historical Cavendish emphasises the importance of these traits in the self-denial of the fictional women who populate her writing.

The female protagonist who kills herself for love is a stock figure in romance. Cavendish's work contains its share of suicidal heroines, but is remarkable for including a theoretical discussion of their desire for self-murder in terms of agency. Many of Cavendish's heroines (and some of her heroes) are placed in situations where the only act they can imagine themselves performing to shape their destinies is suicide. It is important to examine the ways in which the range of options came to appear so narrow, and the way women—in a society which restricted their agency in the world—were forced to turn on themselves for the only form of control

available to them. Death and self-deprivation—sometimes described as death-in-life—become ‘creative’ acts when all other outlets are thwarted.

At the same time, a fittingly dramatic death will crown the story of a life and make it worthy of fame, so death is not only a last resort when all other means of self-expression are barred, but also a direct means of expression which fits with the project of creating a memorable life. A heroine may claim she is doing the feminine thing and dying for love, but in Cavendish’s work she is as likely to be dying for fame.

Although many characters contemplate suicide, and a character who desires death is usually dead by the end of the episode, only a few of them actively kill themselves. The gap between desire and actuality is filled for the remaining characters (the ‘better’ ones) by wasting away or expiring of excessive emotion. The “faithfull Widow, or mournfull Wife” is a paragon of constancy who lives by her husband’s tomb and asks the gods to “[g]ive my soul leave to seek which wayes his went” (NP: 2). She denies herself all joys in life, saying “[t]hey fled away when that his Body dy’d”, and rejects the male protagonist’s entreaties to enjoy life while she is yet alive (NP: 3). Although she is too much the gentle lady to kill herself in melodramatic fashion, the tale ends with her death from unknown causes: “And after in short time I heard she dy’d, / Her Tombe was built close by her Husbands side” (NP: 4).

Many of Cavendish’s stories of famous lives involve the sort of ‘heroic’ death or virtuous wasting away which trades experience of life for remembrance after death. In this case the protagonist wastes

away after denying herself the goods and sustenance of life, but dying of an excess of emotional upheaval is another acceptable option, particularly when it takes the form of what may be called “psychic suttee”:

The Bride, when that she saw her Husband faint,  
 She weeping mourn’d, and made a sad complaint;  
 O Gods, said she, grant me but this request,  
 That I might die here on my Husbands breast.  
 With that she fell, and on his lipps did lie,  
 Suckt out each others breath, and so did die (NP: 46).

The other alternative is a more active pursuit of death, and such is found in “The Description of the Violence of Love”, in which the young lovers are separated when he dies in battle for the royalist cause. She then delivers an address which deals with fate, free will, theism, and agency:

Why pray we, and offer to high Heaven,  
 Since what we ask, we seldom have us given:  
 If their Decrees are fixed, what need we pray:  
 Nothing can alter Fates, nor cross their way:  
 If they leave all to Chance, who can apply?  
 For every chance is then a Deity:  
 But if a power they keep to work at will,  
 It shews them cruel to torment us still.  
 When we are made, in pain we allwayes live,  
 Sick Bodyes, or griev’d Minds to us they give;  
 With Motions which run cross, composed we are,  
 Which makes our Reason and our Sense to jar;  
 When they are weary to torment us, must  
 We then return, and so dissolve to Dust.  
 But if I have my fate in my own power,  
 I will not breath, nor live another hour:  
 Then with the Gods I shall not be at strife,  
 If my Decree can take away my Life.

\*\*\*\*\*

Then to her Heart the Pistol set, and shot  
 A Bullet in, by which her Grief forgot;  
 Fame with her Trumpet blew in every ear,  
 The sound of this great act spread every where (NP: 30-31).

This death is memorable, presented as virtuous, and deserving of renown. It is also very definitely an act of self-assertion.

One of the women tells a story, "The Description of the Fondness of Parents, and the Credulity of Youth," which has parallels to this. In this tale, however, the young woman is seduced by the son of a wealthy man, who tells her to follow nature and delight her senses: "Thus we shall use what Nature to us gave, / For by restraint, in Life we dig our Grave" (NP: 50). Believing his vows the equivalent of marriage, the young woman "yielded she to all he did desire" (NP: 50). When she finds she is pregnant (a circumstance peculiar to the stories told by the women) her lover is rapidly shipped off overseas by his father and she hangs herself, fatally echoing a couplet in the seduction speech: "Man no free power hath of any thing, / Onely himself can to destruction bring" (NP: 51). Fear of or distaste for the forces unleashed by sexuality, and in particular the female body's treacheries in pregnancy, underlie much of Cavendish's writing.

Contrary to the view of suicide in grief at the loss of love as a "great act," and typical of Cavendish's technique of presenting opposing views through different narrators, is the idea expressed in the following story, "Humanity, Despair, and Jealousie, express'd in three Persons." A woman tries to drown herself because her lover has married someone else. She is 'rescued' and told:

Thus you 'gainst nature set your selfe at odds,

And by the wish you do displease the Gods;  
 By violence you cut off their Decree,  
 No violence in Nature ought to be;  
 But what makes you thus strive for to destroy  
 That life, which Gods did give you to enjoy (NP: 33).

She then tells her story before expiring in a socially acceptable way. The unfaithful lover appears too late to say he was only testing her fidelity: he kills himself. This speech presents the later Christian view that the agency of self-slaughter denied God the power to determine the hour of each person's death.

It must be noted that the tales which most clearly state that women's virtue lies in their willingness to die for love are given to male narrators in the early fabular dialogue of the sexes, and that the women in the circle generally object to the notion that women are only good when they die for constancy of love. To male narrators are also given the most damning indictments of women's lack of constancy, showing the dual image of the immortal angel and the fickle and frustrating woman of flesh and blood:

Farewell you Angel of a Heavenly Breed,  
 For sure thou com'st not from a Mortal Seed;  
 Thou art so constant unto Virtue, fair,  
 Which very few of either sexes are (NP: 4).

Women care not, not seek for noble praise.  
 All their delight runns to Romancy ways,  
 To be in love and be belov'd again,  
 And to be fought for by the youngest men,  
 Not for their Vertue, but their Beauty fair,  
 Intangling men within their amorous snare... (NP: 47).

Against that generalisation is this:



A Woman said, that Tale exprest Love well,  
And shew'd that Constancy in Death did dwell (NP: 31).

The author's intentions are important and unfathomable here: is this ironic? Or is it a statement that unchanging constancy belongs to the stasis of death rather than the dynamism of life?

It comes as a pleasant change to find that fame does not have to be posthumous but can be achieved by a life of virtuous study and the accumulation of wit and wisdom. One woman who takes this course is Cavendish's unnamed she-Anchoret, who after her father's death:

although she had maney, rich and honourable and importunate suters; yet she resolved to live like a kinde of an Anchorets life, living incloistered by her self alone; vowing chastity, and a single life, but gave leave for any to speak to her through a grate.... But she had not been long inclosed, but she grew as famous, as *Diogenes* in his tub, all sorts of people resorted to her, to hear her speak, and not only to hear her speak, but to get knowledge, and to learn wisdom (NP: 289).

So fame may be achieved by a life of ascetic self-denial coupled with the power of the public word. The simultaneous veiling and revealing which this retreat and publication involves is typical of Cavendish—tell people loudly that you want to be alone but are available for consultation between certain hours. The she-Anchoret's life is an exaggerated version of Cavendish's own method of accruing fame.

Yet even the she-Anchoret cannot free herself of the desirable complications of fame. Her beauty is as great as her learning, and the King of the next Kingdom is enthralled by her, promising to put

aside his queen if she will marry him. When she refuses, he threatens war against her Kingdom if she is not yielded up to him, and in order to prevent this war, which would destroy her land, she convenes a meeting of ambassadors, takes poison, and publicly dies.

[T]hey buried her with great solemnity, and intombed her costly, the State setting up her Statue of brasse, for her courage and love to her Countrey, the Church Deified her a Saint for her vertue and piety: and the Clergy raised altars, where all the Kingdom twice a year did offer unto her solemn Sacrifices thereon: And the Poets built severall Piramides of praise of her beauty, wit, vertue, and sweet graces, which Piramides reacht to Fames highest Tower, and the Historians writ her life and death in golden letters, and recorded them in Fames brasen Tower, that all the world might know and follow the example of her heroick spirit, generous soul, chaste body, pious life and voluntary death (NP: 356-7).

This death is a great act which saves the lives of many and gains their undying gratitude. Suicide is here not a last resort for personal agency when all other avenues are closed, but a public spectacle to crown a perfect life.

Although she could arrange for the populace to worship the she-Anchoret, Cavendish was not so sure of her audience's willingness to do the same for her. Drawing again on her notion of the small realm of absolute control, she determined to write her own history since she could not be sure that others would do it for her.

## Conclusion: Cavendish's Project



In her effort to leave her mark on the world and the minds of others, Cavendish produced books which showed her as both creator—Cavendish the thinker and author—and artifact—the Cavendish who is written and presented in the texts. She was motivated to project images of self out into the external word in a form of colonisation in which the boundaries of self are expanded and others are made to participate in the extended self.

This project was at least in part a reaction to the fact that Cavendish had little power in the world of politics and adventure, and her claim to fame as the second wife of then-dispossessed English nobleman was not great. She invented a world where she did have control—where her authorial fiat was absolute. As the maker of that world she was all-powerful: as the prime inhabitant and actor in that world she was all-gifted and all-desirable.

The books themselves are often conceptual playgrounds in which alternatives are played off against each other in meandering fashion to see which will survive. She introduces new twists and ways of interpreting old ideas, making her transgressive publications into aggressive defences of virtue and extending the woman-made self into a realm of high drama under the floodlights of fame. In her phancies Cavendish opens out a space where a select few special women can take on the world. Despite the fact that this arena of assertive action is usually gone at the ends of her stories, which find their closures in the traditional deaths and

marriages, it is a conceptual advance for a woman to develop these possibilities.

It was also as far as Cavendish could go, for she was complicit in a patriarchal social structure which benefited her as well as restricting her. There were attractive options available to Cavendish which simply did not exist for most of her contemporaries, and she does not, at times, seem to appreciate this when she berates other women for not having made their own journeys to “Fames high Tower”. Cavendish was an individualist rather than the originator of a new way of life for women: one of the eccentric aunts of women’s writing in English who found ways around convention and now bemuses her literary nieces by having been at once so adventurous and so trapped in the ideas of her time.

### **Fame and Immortality Redux**

It seems she had a much better grasp of the future than of the current age (Wulf, unpublished phone conversation, 9 Nov).

Cavendish ended *Natures Pictures* with the desire that although her words might not be recognised in their own time, they might in after-ages live. Even if she realised that she would not achieve the fame she desired in her lifetime, her actions in lodging copies of her works with the universities and distributing her publications to large libraries—actions which gained her some flattering letters from establishments probably in search of patronage, and which contribute to the paradox of one who so spurned conventional scholarship seeming to seek recognition by it—have eventually borne fruit. Cavendish’s works are beginning to accrue critical commentary in a way which was not possible at the time she wrote,

and although they are still not easy to find, the recent Microfilms International series has at least made them available to those in the academic world. A fame of sorts is beginning to bloom for this strange woman who knew the importance of publication to the continuance of one's name: a woman who, knowing that physical beauty would fade, created a lasting beauty in words which she hoped would ensure her immortal fame.

And for Poetry, most laugh at it as a ridiculous thing, especially grave Statists, severe Moralists, zealous Priesthood, wrangling Lawyers, covetous Houders, or Purloiners, or those that have mechanick natures, and many more, which for the most part account Poetry a toy, and condemn it for a vanity, and idle employment; nor have they so much Phancy of their own, as to conceive the Poetical phancies of others; for if they did, they must needs love Poetry; for Poetry is so powerfull, and hath such an attractive beauty, that those that can but view her perfectly, could not but be enamoured, her charms do so force attention. But surely those that delight not in Poetry or Musick, have no divine souls, nor harmonious thoughts (NP: 365).

## Afterword

---

In 1671, after the restoration of the monarchy and Cavendish's return to England, a second edition of *Natures Pictures* was published. This version differs from the 1656 version: it has been edited by a secretary to make the text flow more cleanly; it gathers the stories together into a first book of poetry and a second book of prose, running the long stories in with the moral and cynical tales; it places the stories from the scrapheaps at either end of the 1656 edition in their 'rightful' places in the text and eliminates almost all the introductory letters; and it leaves out the "true Relation." The impression is of a more organised and reserved work by a more organised and reserved writer who confines her self-revelation to the fictional and distanced mode. Hesitations and stammerings have been erased to create a far more unified text, but its greater polish and control deprives the second edition of the disordered vitality which brought life to the 1656 version.

## Acknowledgements



It is my pleasure to thank Helen Debenham for all the time she devoted to this work, the books she lent, the ideas she helped shape, and her firm guidance on matters of style. I am most grateful to have worked under her supervision, although in my own wilful way I have ignored some of her good advice and this project is probably the worse for it. Thanks also to the other lecturers who gave of their time and ideas: to Reg Berry and Denis Walker, my co-supervisors; to Glenn Burgess for insights into Stuart history; and to Yvonne Reineke, for discussion of Kristeva and cornmeal.

I am also indebted to the graduate students—Andrei, Bettina, Cassandra, Christina, David, Fran, Isabelle, Jeni, Joan, Mary, Mike, Rebecca, Rosey, Ruth, Vicki, et al—who have shared conversation and support yea even in the valley of the shadow of Literary Theory.

And to those who have helped me through the arduous and ever-expanding time of this project: to Kate van Heughten, for care and concern above and beyond; to the other Hounds of Auburn, Phil Anderson and Sean Broadley, for friendship and support, not to mention tolerance of fibre crafts which invaded the house; to the rest of the Saturday group—Alan Millar, who let me drive him round the bend, and Vicki and Peter Hyde who probably wish I hadn't done the same to them; and to the modemers, singers,

medievalists, KAOSians, and soft toys, without whom I could have fitted the same amount of work into half the time. Honest.

Others have helped by pointing out snippets and tracing articles for me. Thanks go especially to one Richard for photocopying, and to another Richard for making me explain the English Civil War in terms of roundheads and cavaliers.

And finally to Stephen Rennell, for care brought and given, for much learned and more ventured, with great fondness.



## Appendix A:

### Cavendish's Bibliography

- 
- 1653 *Poems, and Fancies.*
- 1653 *Philosophicall Fancies.*
- 1655 *The Worlds Olio.*
- 1655 *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions.*
- 1656 *Natures Pictures drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life.*
- 1662 *Playes.*
- 1662 *Orations of Divers Sorts, Accomodated to Divers Places.*
- 1663 *Philosophical and Physical Opinions.*
- 1664 CCXI. *Sociable Letters.*
- 1664 *Philosophical Letters.*
- 1664 *Poems, and Fancies.* (Revised Edition.)
- 1666 *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy. To which is added, The Description of a new Blazing World.*
- 1667 *The Life of the thrice Noble, High and Puissant Prince William Cavendishe.*
- 1668 *De Vita et Rebus Gestis Nobilissimi Illustrissimique Principis, Guiliemi Ducis Novo-castrensis, commentarii.*
- 1668 *Grounds of Natural Philosophy.*

- 1668 *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy: To which is added, The Description of a new Blazing World.*
- 1668 *The Description of a New World, called the Blazing-World.*
- 1668 *Playes, never before Printed.*
- 1668 *Poems, or, Sevrал Fancies in Verse: with the Animal Parliament, in Prose.*
- 1668 *Orations of Divers Sorts, Accomodated to Divers Places.*
- 1671 *Natures Pictures drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life.*  
(Revised Edition.)
- 1671 *The Worlds Olio.* (Revised Edition.)

## Appendix B:

### Contents of *Natures Pictures*

---

Contents and description of *Natures Pictures drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life* by Margaret (Lucas) Cavendish, then Marchioness of Newcastle, first printed in 1656 for J. Martin and J. Allestrye at the Bell in Saint Paul's Church-yard. This list of contents compiled from the microform version of the text (Wing No. N855 from the University Microfilms International series).

The microfilmed version of the first edition has various handwritten annotations to the text which are claimed, in a blurb written in nineteenth century copperplate by a prospective seller, to be by Cavendish herself. The handwritten annotations warrant attention from someone with knowledge of the history of writing styles. The marginal annotations to the text, which usually offer a word to replace one that has been crossed out in the text or insert one where the meter is short a foot, are similar to what I have seen of Cavendish's notorious handwriting in facsimiles of her letters to William Cavendish, and are the sort of corrections I can imagine her making to salvage a text mangled in printing. The attributions of certain poems and sections of the text to "my Lord Marquis" is done in a hand more slanting and less rounded than the textual emendations, and ironically more like the seller's inscription on the flyleaf. Although it is possible that Cavendish used her best writing for the attributions, the distinctly different treatment of descenders makes me suspect two different hands.

Some pages are only marginally legible because of show-through from the text on the other side of the paper.

---

#### Extra-Textual Introductions

Card with details of Microfilm:

N855 Newcastle, Margaret Cavendish, duchess of. Natures pictures. For J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1656. fol .  
(Print-show through.)

Handwritten inscription:

Newcastle D:[?] [abbrev for Duchess] Nature's Pictures &c[?]  
1656. This edition is rare, & valuable. It has the life of the  
D:[?] written by herself p. 368-391. which was suppressed in  
the subsequent edition. It has besides the extremely rare  
print of the Newcastle family by Clouet, always very dear, a  
Proof of which at ?? M.Sykes's Sale of Prints sold for £64.1.0  
This Copy too has MSS notes by the D:[?] pointing out the  
Songs and passages written by the Duke who was then  
Marquis of Newcastle.

### Title Page and Dedication

Frontispiece: print by Clouet of the Newcastle circle, with the verse:

Thus in this Semy circle, wher they Sitt;  
Telling of Tales of pleasure & of witt.  
Heer you may read without a Sinn or Crime,  
And how more innocently pass your tyme.

Title page:

NATURES PICTVURES DRAWN BY FANCIES PENCIL TO  
THE LIFE / Written by the thrice Noble, Illustrious, and  
Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of NEWCASTLE. /  
In this Volume there are several feigned Stories of Natural  
Descriptions, as Comical, Tragical, and Tragi-Comical,  
Poetical, Romancical, Philosophical, and Historical, both in  
Prose and Verse, some all Verse, some all Prose, some mixt,  
partly Prose, and partly Verse. Also, there are some Morals,  
and some Dialogues; but they are as the Advantage Loaves of  
Bread to a Bakers dozen; and a true Story at the latter end,  
wherein there is no Feignings. / LONDON, Printed for J.  
Martin, and J. Allestrye, at the Bell in Saint Paul's Church-  
yard, 1656. [A1]

The Dedication.

To Pastime . . . [teaching & entertaining]

I hope you'll like it, if not, I'm still the same,  
Careless, since Truth will vindicate my Fame.

[10 lines, rhymed couplets]

[A3]

### Introductory Letters: by William Cavendish

To the Lady Marchioness of NEWCASTLE, on her Book of Tales.

[Advertisement by Wm. N. Innocence of the book, but fun anyway. Banquet image.]

[ 2p, 30 lines, rhymed couplets]

[A5]

A Copy of Verses to the Lady Marchioness of NEWCASTLE, of all her Works, which are now all printed, except her Tragedies and Comedies, which will shortly come out.

[Wm. N.: defense of Cavendish's writing]

...For when you're dead, and all your envious looks,

These Writings they will live as long as Books.

O but a Woman writes them, she doth strive

T'intrench too much on Man's Prerogative;

Then that's the crime her learned Fame pulls down;

[Lengthy comparison with classical male writers, claiming Cavendish has clearer fancies than Homer, better observations than Hippocrates, etc.]

[ 3p, rhymed couplets]

[A7]

### Introductory Letters: by Margaret Cavendish

TO THE READER.

[A11]

[An introductory letter setting forth Cavendish's design in writing the stories: "to present Virtue", "to defend Innocency", and "to shew that Vice is seldome crown'd with good Fortune." Develops the title's imagery of painting as metaphor for writing.] [ 1p, prose]

AN EPISTLE To my Readers.

[A13]

[Explains that the stories are drawn from fancy rather than from "true Originalls," and that Cavendish is an ambitious woman who writes because other avenues are closed to her.]

[1 1/4 p, prose]

TO THE READER.

[A15]

[In which Cavendish denies contact with the tradition of writing romance and lists the virtues of her own variant of writing.] [2 1/4 p, prose]

TO THE READER. [A18]

[Discussion of fancy/imagination vs. description: fancy her natural mode, but she's tried to lay it by in this work. Censure won't hurt her.] [1 1/2 p, prose]

TO MY READERS. [A20]

[Recommendation of the stories called "The Anchoret and the Experienced Traveller" as "most solid and edifying."] [1/2 p, prose]

TO MY READERS. [A21]

[Likens the arrangement of pieces in the first book to the ordering of tunes by musicians; mixed forms/functions; concerns about her writing style and use of language.] [3 p, prose]

**The First Catch-All**

Her Excellencies Comical Tales in Prose.

The first Part.

The strict Associate. [A25]

[A lady refuses to receive a young and beautiful suitor who does not have the qualities she requires.] [1 p, prose]

The Judgement. [A26]

[The problems of comparing two countries: France and England.] [1 p, prose]

The Vulgar fights. [A27]

[A tale of men's quarrels and women's quarrels and the grief to be got from getting involved in them.] [3 p, prose]

THE TOBACCONIST. [A31]

[Two maids talk of the effects of tobacco on husbands.] [1 p, prose]

## The Final Beginning—The Book Itself

### Her Excellencies Tales in Verse.

#### The first Book.

[intro. to round of stories]	1
[Defence of her writings. Women and men around fire in winter agree to tell tales.] [1 p, rhymed couplets]	
Of the faithfull Widow, or mournfull Wife.	2
[Traveller hears of constant widow, tests her self- sacrificial constancy and fails to divert her.] [2 1/2 p, prose]	
A Description of diverted grief.	4
[Widower remarries (unhappily) despite promises of eternal fidelity.]	
The Effeminate Description.	6
[Solitary thinking woman tells man that woman are by nature mutable and inconstant.]	
[A Man in love was . . .]	8
[A courtly lover forsakes his lady when smallpox destroys her beauty.]	
A Description of Constancy.	8
[Intrigues at court and war as an orphaned heiress and the prince she loves try to find a happy ending.]	
[With four songs by William Cavendish at pp20- 21, and another four (marriage songs) at pp25-27.]	
[They succeed: the wedding songs.]	
The Description of the Violence of Love.	27
Humanity, Despair, and Jealousie, express'd in three Persons.	32
[A merry Lass . . .]	36
[Another man . . .]	37
A description of Love and Courage.	38
[A Batcheler that spiteful was . . .]	47
The description of the Fondness of Parents, and the Credulity of Youth.	49
[A sober Man . . .]	54
[A Lady said . . .]	55
A Single Life best.	57

[ <i>A Lady said . . .</i> ]	57
A Description of Natural Affection.	60
The surprizal of Death. [William's ?]	63
A Mock-Tale of the Lord Marquis of NEWCASTLES.	65
The Tale of the four Seasons of the Year.	67
[ <i>A Poet . . .</i> ]	70
The Expression of the Doubts and Curiosity of Man's Minde.	71
A Description of the Fall of foolish and self-conceited Pride.	75
A Mock-Tale of the Marquis of NEWCASTLES, which serves but as shadows to set off the rest. And confesseth ingeniously, that he was never good at telling a Tale, for he loves Truths too well. But he sayes, his Readers will believe him without swearing.	79
[ <i>A Lady said . . .</i> ]	83
[ <i>The next turn, a Man . . .</i> ]	84
[ <i>They said, his tale was short . . .</i> ]	84
A Description of the Passion of Love mis-placed.	85
[ <i>The Men condemn'd the Tale . . .</i> ]	87
A Description of Civil Wars.	88
[ <i>A Woman said . . .</i> ]	89
[ <i>Then, said a Man . . .</i> ]	90
[ <i>A Lady said . . .</i> ]	90
[ <i>The next time was a Man . . .</i> ]	92
[ <i>A Ladyes turn was next . . .</i> ]	93
[ <i>Fye, saith a Man . . .</i> ]	93
The Prologue to the Beggars Marriage.	93
The Marquis of NEWCASTLES Description of <i>The Beggars Marriage.</i>	94
A Tale of my Lord Marquis of NEWCASTLES, Called the Philosophers Complaint.	97
An Epistle to my Readers.	103
[Judge by recreational standard: fame and praise.]	
Her Excellencies Comical Tales in Prose.	



## The second Book.

The Schools Quarrels, or Scholars Battles.	105
The Observer.	107
The Discreet Virgin.	109
Of three Travellers.	113
The Loving Cuckold.	114
The Converts in Marriage.	116
Ages Folly.	116
The three Wooers.	117
Ambition preferr'd before Love.	120
The Matrimonial Agreement.	121
Of two Ladyes different Humours.	124

## The third Book

The Drunken Poets.	128
Loves Cure.	129
The propagating Souls.	132
Phancies Monarchy in the Land of Poetry.	134
The Marriage of Life and Death.	136
Of the Indispositions of the Minde.	137
The Thoughts feasted.	143
The Travelling Spirit.	144
The Tale of the Lady in the <u>Elyzium</u> .	148
The Speculators.	149
The Body, Time, and Minde, disputed for Preheminency.	153
A Triennial Government, of Nature, Education, and Experience.	155
Natures House.	156
A Dispute.	156
[ <i>I Had a Design to put my Opinions of my Atomes in Prose . . .</i> ]	157
A Description begun of the several Figures of my Atomes.	157
The Preaching Lady.	159

## Her Excellencies Moral tales in Prose.

## The fourth Book.

A Moral Tale of the Ant and the Bee.	162
The second Moral Tale of the Ant and the Bee.	165
The third Moral Tale of the Ant and the Bee.	165
A Tale of the Woodcock and the Cow.	166
Of a Butcher and a Fly.	169
The Tale of a Man and a Spider.	170
Her Excellencies Dialogues in Prose.	
The fifth Book.	
A Dialogue betwixt a great Lady, and her Maid of Honour.	172
A Dialogue betwixt a Contemporary Lady and a Poet.	175
The Dialogue betwixt the Wise Lady, the Learned Lady, and the Witty Lady.	177
The sixth Book.	
The Contract	183
The seventh Book.	
The Ambitious Traytor.	215
The eight Book.	
[introductory letter]	218
Assaulted and pursued Chastity.	220
The ninth Book.	
The first Part	
The Tale of a Traveller.	273
The tenth Book.	
This Book called the she Anchoret, I present to Naturall Philosophers, Physicians: Moral Philosophers, Theological Students, Preachers, or	

Judges, Tradesmens, Masters of Families, Married-men, and their Wives, Nurses, Widowers, and Widows, Virgins, Lovers, Poets, and Aged Persons, and Souldiers.

The she Anchoret.

[Father's death-bed in poetry.] 287

The description of her life in prose. 289

The first sort that came to her were Naturall Philosophers, who asked her opinion of Mans Soul, of which she discoursed in this manner. 289

The severall and various opinions, whether a Cat seeth in the night, or no ?—William) 298-299

The second sort that were to visit her, were Physicians. 299

The third sort that visited her were Moral Philosophers. 314

[The fourth that visited her were Schollars...] 317

The fifth that visited her, were holy Fathers of the Church, who desired her to speak to whom she spake as following. 320

The sixt sort that visited her were Judges, who asked her about Justice. 321

The seventh fort that visited her were Barresters and Orators, to whom she thus spake. 324

The eighth sort of Visitors were States men, who askt her what governement was best for a Common wealth? 326

The ninth sort were Tradesmen or Citizens.	330
The tenth sort that visited her were House-keepers, and Masters of Families, &c.	331
The eleventh sort that visited her, were married men and their Wives.	333
The twelfth sort were Nurses with their Nurse-children.	340
The thirteenth sort were Widowers and Widowes.	342
The fourteenth sort were Virgins.	345
The fifteenth sort were Lovers.	347
The sixteenth sort of Visitors were Poets.	348
The seventeenth sort that visited her were Aged Persons.	350
The eighteenth sort were Souldiers.	353
The last sort that visited her, Were Historians.	354
[But to draw towards an end of my tale...]	355
Heavens Library, which is Fames Palace purged from Errors and Vices.	357
The eleventh Book.	
An Epistle. [reply to crit. - writings her own &c]	363
A true Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life.	368
An Epistle, to be placed before my she Anchoret.	393
(This is to be placed next the Tale of the Philosopher, which my Lord writ.)	395

The two idle Gentlemen.	396
The Lady Incognito.	397
A Complaint and a Request to the Noble and Learned readers of my several Works, especially my Philosophical and Physical Opinions. [bad printing]	399
[poem re fame in after ages]	390[*404]
Finis	"
Errata.	[*405]

## Works Cited and Consulted

---

- Alic, Margaret. *Hypatia's Heritage: A History of Women in Science from Antiquity to the Late Nineteenth Century*. London: The Women's Press, 1986.
- Allen, Prudence. *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution 750 BC—Ad 1250*. Montreal and London: Eden Press, 1985.
- Anderson, Linda. "At the Threshold of the Self: Women and Autobiography." In *Women's Writing* Ed. Moira Monteith. Sussex: Harvester, 1986.
- Barker, Francis and others. *1642: Literature and Power in the Seventeenth Century*. University of Essex, 1981.
- Beilin, Elaine V. *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Benstock, Shari ed. *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Berry, Philippa. *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Blaydes, Sophia B. "Nature is a Woman: The Duchess of Newcastle and Seventeenth-Century Philosophy." In *Man, God, and Nature in the Enlightenment*. Ed. Donald C. Mell and others. East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1988.
- Bowerbank, Sylvia. "The Spider's Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the 'Female' Imagination." *English Literary Renaissance*. 14 (1984) 3: p. 392-408.

- Bruss, Elizabeth W. *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- de Certeau, Michel. *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Davies, Stevie. *The Idea of Woman in Renaissance Literature: The Feminine Reclaimed*. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986.
- Dubrow, Heather, and Richard Strier (Eds). *The Historical Renaissance: New Essays on Tudor and Stuart Culture and Literature*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Ferguson, Moira. ed. *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578-1799*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. London: The Women's Press, 1979 & 1988 (first published 1970).
- Firth, C.H. (ed.) *The Life of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle by Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle*. London: George Routledge & Sons, 1886.
- Fitzmaurice, James. "Fancy and the Family: Self-characterisations of Margaret Cavendish." *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 53 (1990) p. 198-209.
- Gagen, Jean. "Honor and Fame in the Works of the Duchess of Newcastle," *Studies in Philology*. v.56, pp 519-538.
- Gallagher, Catherine. "Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England," *Genders*, 1: 24-39, 1988.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women; The Tradition in English*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, year not recorded.

- Goldberg, Jonathen. *Voice Terminal Echo: Postmodernism and English Renaissance texts*. New York and London: Methuen, 1986.
- Grant, Douglas. *Margaret the First: A Biography of Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle 1623-1673*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. (Ed.) *Representing the English Renaissance*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988.
- Greer, Germaine; Susan Hastings; Jeslyn Medoff; and Melinda Sansone, Eds. *Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Women's Verse*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1989. (First published in Great Britain in 1988.)
- Haselkorn, Anne M., and Betty S. Travitsky (Eds). *The Renaissance Englishwoman in Print: Counterbalancing the Canon*. Amhurst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990.
- Henderson, Katherine Usher, and Barbara F. McManus. *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Ed. John Plamenatz. London: Collins, 1969. First published in 1651.
- Hobby, Elaine. *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing 1646-1688*. London: Virago Press, 1988.
- Jones, Kathleen. *A Glorious Fame: The Life of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, 1623-1673*. London: Bloomsbury, 1988.



- Lamb, Charles. *Everybody's Lamb: Being a selection from The Essays of Elia The Letters and the Miscellaneous Prose of Charles Lamb*. Ed. A. C. Ward. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1933.
- Lever, J.W. *The Tragedy of State*. London: Methuen, 1971.
- Levin, Carole, and Jeanie Watson. *Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987.
- Lloyd, Geneviève. *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*. London: Methuen, 1984.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*. Trans. George Bull. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Makin, Bathsua. *An Essay To Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen (1673)*. Reprinted by the Augustan Reprint Society as Publication Number 202 of the William Andrew Clark Memorial Library for the University of California, 1980.
- Marks, Elaine, and Isabelle de Courtivron (Eds.) *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981.
- Mendelson, Sara Heller. *The mental world of Stuart women: three studies*. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1987.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. (Ed) Scott Elledge. New York: W.W. Norton, 1975.
- Milton, John. *The Complete Poems*. London: J.M. Dent, 1980.
- Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women*. New York: Doubleday, 1976.
- Newcastle, Margaret Lucas Cavendish, Duchess of. *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life*. London, 1656. (Copy from microfilm.)

- *Sociable Letters*. London, 1664. Menston, England: Reproduction by Scolar Press, 1969.
- *The Lives of William Cavendishe, Duke of Newcastle, and of his wife, Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle*. Reprint Ed. Mark Antony Lower. London, 1872.
- Nussbaum, Felicity A. *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Univerity Press, 1989.
- Oestreich, Gerhard. *Neostoicism and the early modern state*. trans. David McLintock. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Paloma, Dolores. "Margaret Cavendish: defining the female self." *Women's Studies* 7 (1980) p. 55–66.
- Parry, Graham. *Seventeenth-Century Poetry: the Social Context*. London: Hutchinson, 1985.
- Partridge, Eric. *Shakespeare's Bawdy: A Literary & Psychological Essay and a Comprehensive Glossary*. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1956.
- Pepys, Samuel. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*. Eds. Robert Latham and William Matthews. London: G Bell and Sons, 1974.
- Perry, Henry Ten Eyck. *The First Duchess of Newcastle and Her Husband as Figures in Literary History*. Boston and London: Ginn and Company, 1918. Reprinted in 1968 by the Johnson Reprint Corporation of New York and London.
- Robertson, Eric S. *English Poetesses: A Series of Critical Biographies, with Illustrative Extracts*. London: Cassell, 1883.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works*. Eds. Stanley Wells and others. Clarendon: Oxford, 1988.
- Sharpe, Kevin, and Steven N. Zwicker (Eds). *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-century England*.

- Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1987.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *The Female Imagination: A literary and psychological investigation of women's writing*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1976.
- Spender, Dale. *Mothers of the Novel: 100 good women writers before Jane Austen*. London and New York: Pandora, 1986.
- Thompson, Roger. *Women in Stuart England and America: A comparative study*. London and Boston: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1974.
- Travitsky, Betty. "The Lady Doth Protest: Protest in the Popular Writings of Renaissance Englishwomen." *ELR* 14 (Autumn 1984) 3: p. 255-283.
- Turberville, A.S. *A History of Welbeck Abbey And Its Owners: Volume One: 1539-1755*. London: Faber and Faber, 1938.
- Warnicke, Retha M. *Women of the English Renaissance and Reformation*. Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1983.
- Weinbrot, Howard D. "'An Ambition to Excell': The Aesthetics of Emulation in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries." *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 48 (1985) pp 121-139.
- Wheatley, Henry B. *Samuel Pepys and the World He Lived In*. London: Bickers and Son, 1880.
- Willey, Basil. *The Seventeenth-Century Background: Studies in the thought of the age in relation to poetry and religion*. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1979. (First published 1934.)

Williamson, Marilyn L. *Raising Their Voices: British Women Writers, 1650-1750*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990.

Wilson, Katherina M. (Ed). *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*. Athens (Ga) and London: University of Georgia Press, 1987.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Common Reader: First Series*. London: Hogarth Press, 1962. First published 1925.

----- . *A Room of One's Own*. London: Hogarth Press, 1978. First published 1928.